

黄たそ  
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十二國記

white  
heart



# ***The Shore in Twilight, The Sky at Daybreak***

A Twelve Kingdoms novel

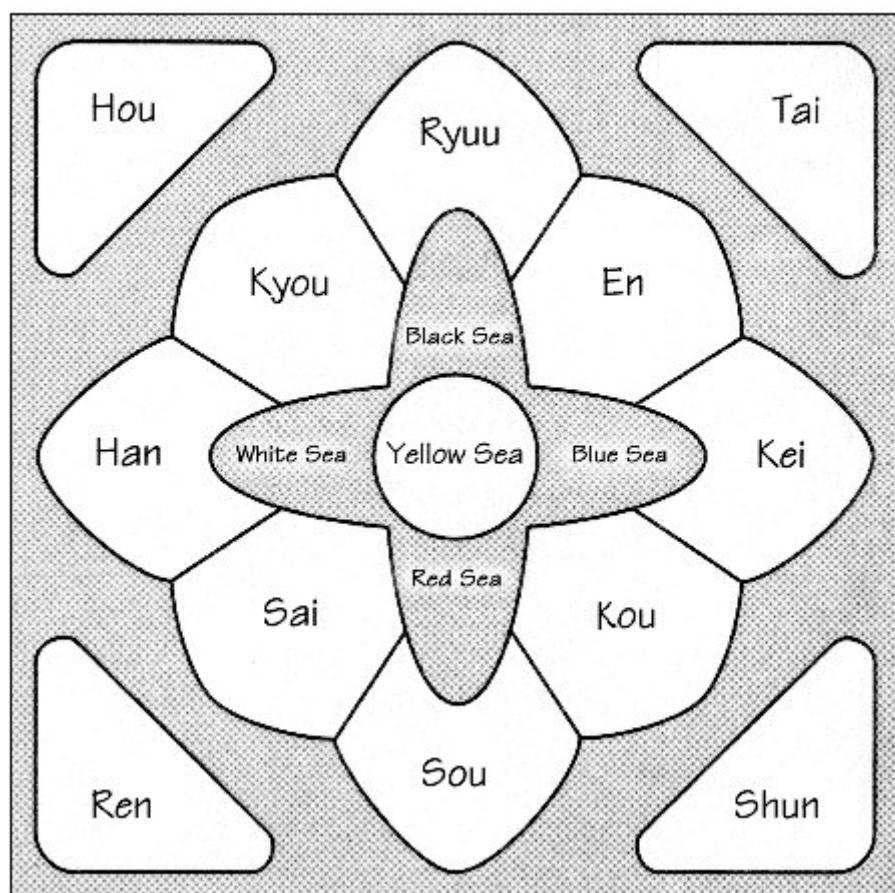
by

**Fuyumi Ono**

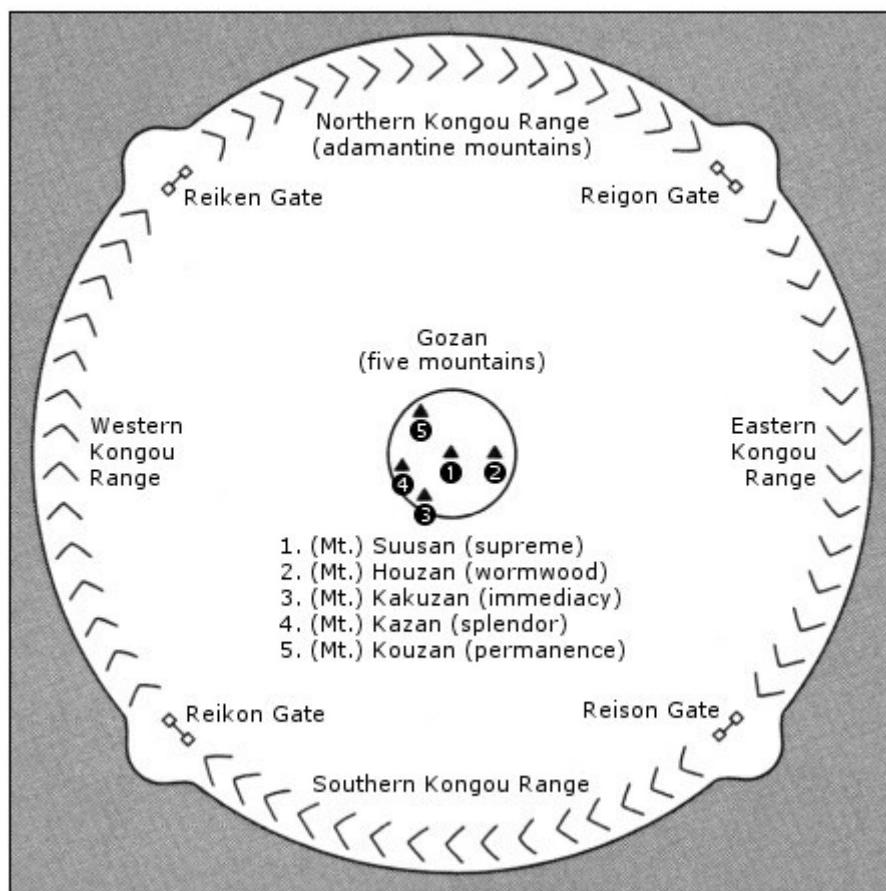
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The Twelve Kingdoms



### The Yellow Sea





# Prologue

[0-1] An early spring day in Tai, the island kingdom situated off the northeast coast of the continent. The snow covering the hills and fields had only begun to melt away. The buds of the plants and flowers slept beneath a blanket of white.

The lands above the Sea of Clouds were no exception. Although the snowpack did not reach the levels of the lands below, most of the trees and shrubs lining the garden groves remained in a deep slumber.

This was Kouki, the capital of Tai. The western quarter of the Hakkei Palace grounds.

Shaped like a horseshoe, the palace held the bay in its broad embrace. One richly forested arm of the horseshoe reached out to the northwest. There, facing the bay, were Jinjuu Manor, the abode of the Saiho of Tai, and Koutoku Manor, where the Saiho, acting as the marquis, conducted the business of the provincial government.

Though the wooded parks were still locked in wintry desolation, the strangely deformed decorative stones and the ministerial estates had about them a kind of severe beauty. The evergreens contributed their deep hues to the frigid landscape. Now approaching first bloom, the plum buds cast off a faint perfume.

Beneath one bough was the figure of a child leaning against a white stone pillar. Steel blue hair flowed down from his bowed head.

This child was the Taiki, the *kirin* of the Kingdom of Tai. The kirin chose the new emperor, seated him upon the throne, and became the Saiho. At the same time, he reigned as province lord in Zui Province, home to the capital of Kouki.

He was only eleven.

Six months ago he had carried out his most important duty and chosen the emperor. This child, the cornerstone of the Kingdom of Tai, was now alone in the gardens.

The emperor was not in Kouki. Two weeks before, he had set off on a long

journey to Bun Province. Taiki couldn't help but feel disheartened and anxious, for Gyousou, Emperor of Tai, had gone there to suppress an uprising.

Taiki could never accommodate himself to war. It was in a kirin's nature to avert his eyes from violence, and the young Taiki had never experienced such conflict. His knowledge of the brutality of battle was purely intellectual. Yet that was where his lord was headed.

To make matters worse, soon after Gyousou left, an ugly rumor spread throughout the palace: the rebellion in Bun Province was a plot to lure the emperor out of his safe haven in order to assassinate him.

Bun Province was north of Zui Province. A rugged, soaring mountain range separated the two provinces. Gyousou had no choice but to cross over the narrow mountain trail that divided the range. According to the rumors, the rebels had taken up positions along a difficult stretch along the route and there were lying in wait.

In fact, the day before, Gyousou's camp had been overrun in a surprise ambush. Disadvantaged by the unfriendly geography, the fight turned ugly. That's what Taiki's informant told him. Distraught and fearful, Taiki felt as if a ton of bricks was crushing his chest.

*Take care. Be safe.*

Taiki could do nothing but earnestly pray. There was no one upon whom he could unburden the anxieties darkening his heart. Overly concerned about frightening him, the adults in his retinue would see no evil and speak no evil. Rumors of the insurrection were mere gossip, they insisted, nothing to worry about.

So having secretly arranged a meeting and heard the bad news for himself, Taiki couldn't share this information with any of the adults. He could, but he would undoubtedly be told that he was mistaken and that it was all rumor and innuendo.

Unless he ducked out of his official meetings, chose a moment when few people were present, and escaped to a place otherwise devoid of human activity, even praying for the emperor's safety was impossible. Everybody treated him as a kid, a youngster, wet behind the ears, and that was both pathetic and

exasperating.

He'd persuaded his fearsome *shirei* and sent them to Bun Province. At the very least, he wished to know if Gyousou was safe or not. He wanted to offer what help he could if and when the fight turned critical.

It was the nature of the benevolent kirin to loathe bloodshed and hate war. Refusing to bear arms or protect themselves through force, they instead commanded the youma and used them as their weapons. But Taiki had only two *shirei* at his disposal.

And so he ordered Sanshi and Gouran to go.

With that, he'd done all he could for Gyousou. *If only* he had more *shirei*. *If only* he was older and could work in concert with other adults and devise a plan to protect Gyousou.

Preoccupied with the stark reality of the situation, The stark reality returning to his thoughts again and again, Taiki was left with no other option but to pray zealously in a corner of the garden. His personal weakness was mortifying.

*Take care. Be safe.*

He'd prayed more times than he could count when he heard the faint sound of footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw *him* standing there. Taiki was relieved to see that it was neither the imperial headmaster nor his bodyguard. Rather, *he* was the one who'd informed Taiki about the dire straits Gyousou was in.

So Taiki didn't have to pretend there was nothing for him to worry about. "Gyousou-sama is okay, isn't he?" Taiki asked as he ran toward him. "Have you heard anything more about him?"

The man shook his head.

"I sent the *shirei*. I'm sorry."

Promising to candidly pass along any information that came his way, the man had implored Taiki not to rashly send the *shirei* to Gyousou. But while he'd apparently kept his end of the bargain, Taiki hadn't done as he'd been asked.

"I couldn't stand by and do nothing."

The man nodded and drew forth the sword he wore at his waist in a single motion. Taiki stopped in his tracks. Not because he was particularly afraid. He still trusted the man. These actions simply perplexed him.

"What's going on?" Taiki queried, suddenly beset by worry, noticing for the first time that the man was casting off a threatening aura that he'd hitherto hidden from view.

"Gyousou is dead," the man said.

Seized by an unconscious sense of dread and beginning to retreat, Taiki's feet froze in place. "You're lying—" he said, looking up at the man.

The man brandished the sword. Taiki gaped at him. He couldn't move. He couldn't cry out. He stood there like a post.

"Too bad you've only got two shirei." The sword glimmered like white ice as it arced downward. "Your mistake was choosing Gyousou."

Even Taiki couldn't say whether the naked blade struck first or whether—exercising the only best option at hand—he had already reflexively turned his body and readied to run.

In either case, the assassin's sword bit deeply into Taiki's horn—that he possessed as a unicorn, not as a person. Taiki howled, a pure and visceral reaction. Not from the pain alone, but from the sense of betrayal and the agonizing loss of his irreplaceable lord.

The cry of a beast *in extremis*, its life in the balance. A cry whose intensity knew no equal. Driven by his instinctual will to flee this place, Taiki abruptly melted away.

"Taiki—?"

The violent shock aroused from Sanshi a high, piercing scream. The white and frozen mountains reached out beneath her. Bun Province lay before her. She emerged at the summit of a small peak in order to determine her location.

Something had happened.

"Taiki—"

What was this pain? The frightening pain and numbness raced through her

body.

Sanshi moaned. No sooner had she come to her senses but she dissolved her body and projected the essential nature of her self within the earth. Her body slipped into the ground.

She knew the veins and ley lines that laced the mantle of the earth. Carried along without form, her “self” raced along these subterranean streams that were at once there and not there. Though “raced” hardly approached the actual meaning. She traveled as if through the dark ocean depths, in the midst of nothing but the chaos of oblivion, with nothing but the weight of that oblivion surrounding her.

Sanshi plunged forward in her mind and with all her might. Far in the distance she set the bright, vivid splash of golden light in her sights.

Pressing through the ley lines, she rose like a bubble rising to sea level. Riding the rising current of air, she burst forth from a “dragon hole” and soared high into the sky. So great was her velocity that the ground was soon shrouded in mist and lost its shape and form.

The golden light grew stronger. Gleaming, sparkling, growing all the more brilliant, illuminating her vision and then filling the entirety of her vision with light.

A golden color like twilight. The moment she slipped into the dusky, golden darkness, Sanshi was forcibly thrown free—

—of the shadow that was Taiki’s own ley line, a ley line that twisted and turned with a frightening force, ripping itself away from this world.

Her flesh crawled with fear. This was so reminiscent of the golden fruit torn from the silver branch right before her eyes so long ago. *I’ve lost him again.* Feelings of despair greater than any of her anxieties assailed her senses.

She leapt from her ley line. Hakkei Palace stood before her. The distortions in the atmosphere were so great that the tiles along the rooftops bent and buckled. Beyond the roofs of the palace the sky was as black as the grave.

*A glimpse of the other world.*

This was a *shoku*. A shoku uniquely brought forth by the scream of a kirin.

Sanshi spotted a distant shadow in the midst of the undulations, the wavering silhouette of a jet-black beast. Its mane cast off a faint glint of light.

“Taiki!”

The wavering palace—the gardens shimmering in the warped air—the twisted and tortured arbor—and leaning beside the arbor, a crabbed and contorted silhouette.

*Who is that?*

Sanshi’s gaze flashed across the horizon. The gate was closing. Without a moment’s hesitation she jumped, dissolved her form, and closed in pursuit.

*His arm.* She reached toward the arm there in her mind’s eye. Her fingers grasped at air. Just a few inches more.

The ley line through which she was traveling shattered behind her. The color—its feel around her—changed.

It had merged with that *other* world.

Sanshi reached out with her heart and soul, clawing at the escaping saffron shadow. Her fingers found purchase—

The trembling rooftops, the shimmering thoroughfares, the warped woods. Beaten down by the surging waves, in a single breath they snapped back to normal shape and form. At the same time she managed to steal into the dusky, golden penumbra.

“Taiki!”

A passerby would have observed an unbelievable spectacle unfold before his eyes.

Here was a small village, old buildings standing in rows between tiny fields. A narrow asphalt road wound through the village. Bathed in fresh April sunlight, gentle waves of warm air rose from the asphalt.

A fierce force rent the gentle waves of air, the waves strengthening and expanding, thickening and solidifying, as if the asphalt itself had exploded in fire.

The waves rose to the height of a large man.

A shadow floated within. The waves slowly disgorged the figure of a person. He took a step and stumbled forward—the unsteady silhouette of a child. Two or three more uncertain, tottering steps and his forward progress stopped.

The child stood on the asphalt. The shimmering waves of heat at his back evaporated into thin air.

And then all that was left was the peaceful spring landscape. A bright, hazy blue sky blotted with silken clouds. From somewhere high above came the song of a skylark.

A warm, gentle breeze rustled the flowers in the fields, bent the stems of the shepherd's purse along the footpath between the rice fields, touched the surface of the road. Reaching the child's shoulders, it ruffled his long hair.

The child stood there in a daze. Or rather, he stood there numb, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, staring straight ahead with unblinking eyes. As if pushed by the gentle wind at his back his feet moved. He took a step, and then another. He started walking almost like an automaton, his stride at length growing more even.

After a few steps he blinked once and suddenly seemed to take hold of his senses. His feet stopped. He took in his surroundings and blinked several more times in amazement.

Tidily arranged fields and rice paddies dotted with old buildings. And among them he spotted newer houses as well. It was a small village somewhere out in the countryside.

He tilted his head to the side, the expression on his face still half-dreaming, half-awake. Ahead of him, where the road met the footpath, he noticed a curtain of black and white funerary bunting.

Taiki had passed over the *Kyokai*, the impassable “Sea of Nothingness.”



# Part One

## Chapter 1

[1-1] In the third year of the reign of Empress Youko, a black pair of wings appeared in the skies above Gyouten.

Gyouten was the capital of Kei, the kingdom occupying the easternmost reaches of the continent. That day, early in the summer, the city slumbered beneath a blanket of listless, hot weather. North of the capital, an enormous mountain soared into the sky like a giant pillar. The city spread out along the foothills that fell away from the descending slopes like the train of a dress.

The terraced city—its steel-blue tile roofs all squashed-together, its roads reaching left and right and up and down bathed in white sunlight—sweltered under the heavy, humid air.

The shutters of every window opened like sails seeking a fresh breeze. But the air had fallen still since noon. The open windows and doors welcomed only the faded, reflected light, the baking heat, and a quiet hustle and bustle that invited sleep.

Perhaps having grown weary of the weather as well, the birds deserted the skies, escaping the sun for the shade of the trees. A dog crawled into the thin shadows beneath the eaves of a house and dozed off. An old man napped in a chair next to the slumbering dog. As the old man slept, his fan dropped from his hand. The dog only raised its snout and cast its master a languid look.

At that moment a shadow fell across the sun.

The dog aroused himself expectantly. The cloud flowed in from the east, as if eating away the blue summer sky. The smell of the humid breeze reached its snout and it heard the sound of distant thunder. The cloud now covered the heavens. In short order the surrounding area plunged into darkness.

That black silhouette appeared in the skies above Gyouten at the same time.

Driven on by the lead-colored clouds, it appeared in the east and traced a wide arc as it approached Ryou'un Mountain. The denizens of the city awaited the rain. But some who looked up recognized what they saw.

Pathetically weak wings barely holding themselves aloft, white plumage fouled and torn, blackened flight feathers mutilated and missing. Descending like a wounded bird, raking desperately at the heavy wet air, the creature closed on Ryou'un Mountain.

Drops of rain began to fall, as if to batter the fleeting shadow into the ground. The rain soon became a downpour assaulting its wings. As it vanished into the mists, swallowed up by the pouring rain, it seemed to those watching from below that the upper reaches of mountain had taken a breath and sucked it into the towering heights.

Toshin loitered beside the enormous gates. The gates were located halfway up the side of Gyouten Mountain on a cliff just below the Sea of Clouds. The secured gates were set into a cave-like alcove many times the height of a man. In front of the alcove was a broad ledge. This was the Forbidden Gate, which provided the only direct access to the Imperial Court and the highest levels of Kinpa Palace on Gyouten Mountain above the Sea of Clouds.

It was past noon. Along with the regular rotation of the guard, Toshin took his position in front of the gate. Below the ledge, the city of Gyouten spread out below him, shimmering in the hot air. There were no breezes even at this great height. The heat hung around him like a sauna.

Clouds finally began to gather in the skies above his head. The clouds came from the east, crawling along the Sea of Clouds as if licking at its base. Toshin heard the sound of distant thunder. A misty haze filled the air. The sheer weight of the clouds seemed to push them down towards the Forbidden Gate, blotting out the sun.

The light drizzle did not even reach as far as the shuttered gates. Toshin observed the leading edge of the ledge turning gray with dampness. Along with the cool, damp breeze the faint rumbling seemed to course along the ground where he stood.

Toshin sighed nonchalantly. "Looks like rain," he said to Gaishi, standing next

to him.

"Yeah." Gaishi took a deep breath, showing his white teeth. "Makes the weather easier to put up with. Armor gets awfully stuffy in this heat." He grinned.

Gaishi was the sergeant in charge of the five-man squad at the Forbidden Gate. Being the sergeant, he was the most experienced, the most skilled, and the one most likely to take charge of a situation. Yet Gaishi didn't lord it over the rest of them. He wasn't stuffy or high-handed. Whether that was how a sergeant should be, or whether that was simply the way Gaishi was, the inexperienced Toshin really didn't know.

Toshin had joined the military a year after the empress was enthroned. Following a year of training he was assigned to the Army of the Left. He'd served officially in this position for half a year. He hadn't worked under any other command but Gaishi's.

A platoon of twenty-five soldiers guarded the Forbidden Gate. One platoon consisted of five squads. Many of the other sergeants and the captain in charge of the platoon were as personable as Gaishi. At least according to the rumors he'd heard, this was hardly the case with other captains.

"Ei Province is hot. Baku Province has better weather."

"Are you from Baku Province, Sergeant?" Toshin asked.

Gaishi nodded. "Born and raised. I was in the Baku Provincial Guard before the present empress was enthroned."

"Wow," said Toshin. He was keenly aware of the unique distinction accorded the soldiers from Baku Province. In fact, the head of the guard of the Forbidden Gate, the general of the Army of the Left, had been chosen from the leadership of the Baku Provincial Guard.

"So do you know General Sei—?" Toshin started to say.

A mass of black emerged suddenly from the curtain of grey just beyond the edge of the cliff. Toshin barely had time to yelp as it shot out of the heavy mist and collided with the rock wall next to the Forbidden Gate. With smothered cries, the creature pawed at the rock face as it slid down to the ledge.

"What the hell!" came Gaishi's tense voice.

The beast sprawled onto the terrace, its wings beating two, three times, as if convulsing. It keened pitifully and collapsed. A solitary human figure tumbled off its back.

Gaishi readied his lance. Toshin followed suit as they ran to where the two of them lay. Only the empress, the Saiho, and those to whom the empress had given special permission could pass through the Forbidden Gate. The pegasus that had fallen at their feet wasn't one of them.

The gate leading to the heart of the palace was not the kind of place that people simply took it upon themselves to approach without consent, their circumstances notwithstanding.

Like Toshin, his fellow soldiers rushing to the side of the beast were ready for a fight. Toshin felt a rock of anxiety growing in the pit of his stomach as he ran. A phalanx of soldiers charged out of the barracks on either side of Forbidden Gate, erecting a wall of lances around the beast and its rider.

Toshin finally got a good look at the two of them. His eyes opened wide with surprise.

The beast resembled an enormous dog with a silver-white body and black head. Dark red blotches spotted the soot-stained down of its ruffled coat. The black fur of its head was sheered clean or torn away in spots. The dirty white tips of its stubby wings and its black flight feathers were shredded and missing.

Lying on its side, it weakly beat at the ground with its wings, but with hardly enough force to call it the flapping of wings. Next to it, sheltered by its wing, lay a human figure in a distressed state hardly different than that of her mount—wounded, filthy, exhausted.

Bewildered, Toshin sought out Gaishi. Standing at the vanguard, his lance at the ready, Gaishi faced the beast and its rider with a startled expression. A buzz of confusion ran through the throng. Gaishi raised his hand to check the forward motion of the soldiers around him. He put down his lance and knelt next to the rider.

"Are you all right?"

Hearing his voice, the rider raised her head. That was when Toshin finally realized the rider was a woman. She was tall, possessed of a rugged constitution, and was wearing leather armor. Or rather, what was left of her armor. It was not all filth and discoloration, but like the beast, was riddled with slashes and missing pieces.

“Can you understand me? How did you come to be here?”

The woman moaned and attempted to sit up. As she made the effort, Toshin realized that her arms were lacerated with deep wounds. Gaishi hesitantly retrieved his lance.

“Don’t move. I’m sorry, but don’t make a move. This is the Forbidden Gate. People of unknown origin are not allowed anywhere near here.”

The woman looked up at Gaishi as if trying to divine his intentions. She answered with a small nod. Gaishi removed the sword from around her waist and handed it to Toshin behind him. He again set down his lance.

With a groan the woman tried to raise herself up. This time she was not impeded. “Forgive me for causing such a commotion,” she murmured, her chest rising and falling with each breath. She managed to kneel. “My name is Ryuу. I hold the rank of general in the Kingdom of Tai.”

“The Kingdom of Tai?” Gaishi echoed, his eyes wide.

A supplicatory look in her eyes, the woman prostrated herself at his feet. “I know I speak with great offense and ask far more than I deserve, but there are words I must humbly share with the Empress of the Eastern Kingdom of Kei!”

# Chapter 2

[1-2] A Registrar of the Imperial Court was called at once to the side entrance of the Forbidden Gate. The Registrar filled an official post in the Ministry of Heaven and tended to various matters at the Imperial Court. A Registrar was positioned at the gate to make a record of all persons who wished entrance to the palace, to confirm their identities, and pass communiques back and forth.

The Registrar came running up along with the captain of the guard. He took one look at the woman and her mount and shouted in a nervous voice, “Get rid of them!”

“But they’re wounded!” said the captain, attempting to intercede.

The Registrar raised his voice and said in his overbearing manner, “A general of the Kingdom of Tai? Does this look like a general? What possible reason would another kingdom’s general have for visiting us in the first place?”

“But—”

“Quiet!” the Registrar barked.

Though Toshin and the other soldiers at the Forbidden Gate were members of the Palace Guard, they were “on loan” to the Registrar. Technically speaking, they were attached to the Ministry of Summer, but the chain of command at the gate went through the Registrar.

“And to make matters worse, they’re befouling the Forbidden Gate.”

He turned to the kneeling woman and grimaced. “If you really are the Tai general you say you are,” he spat out, “then get yourself a change of clothes. After we’ve confirmed your bona fides, feel free to present yourself to the provincial government offices following the acknowledged rules of decorum.”

In that moment, the woman’s shoulders shuddered. Her head snapped up and upon her face, her ravaged body notwithstanding, Toshin perceived a look of

fierce majesty. "I am aware of my impertinence. If I had the time to go through the proper channels I certainly would!"

She spoke in a manner that suggested she was constraining her true feelings, but the Registrar answered with only a cold, dismissive glance. He again blocked the captain's attempts to intercede and turned his back.

In that moment the woman reached out and snatched the lance out of Toshin's grasp. No sooner had Toshin raised his voice in a shout but the woman had broken through the phalanx and ran toward the Forbidden Gate.

The collective breath of surprise taken by the Registrar and Toshin and Gaishi and the other soldiers delayed their actions another second. The soldiers came back to their senses and tore after the woman in a frantic rage. Just before the tips of their lances reached her back, a black wing descended between them. Using the beast's back as cover, the woman bowled through the side gate.

"Get her!" arose a chorus of voices.

Toshin surged to the front of the pack, chasing after the beast as it slipped through the side gate. Forefront on his mind was his blunder. Despite holding the sword Gaishi had entrusted to him, he had carelessly let her steal his lance. There would be hell to pay for a screw-up like that.

His guilty conscience assailed his thoughts. He'd fallen for her ruse like a rube. She'd faked her wounds. Her beast's labored breathing must have been a well-trained act, the business about her being a Tai general a bold-faced lie. He hadn't just fallen for her fabrications. He'd swallowed her shabby, little drama hook, line and sinker. That gave her the opening she needed.

*Her shabby little drama?*

Inside the Forbidden Gate were parade grounds large enough to put a battalion through formation drills. The woman and her beast charged toward the stairs at the back of the plaza. Perhaps catching wind of the uproar, the soldiers and officers on standby spilled from the barracks adjoining the plaza.

*Nothing shabby about it,* Toshin thought as he raced after her. He hadn't seen her performance for what it was. The woman and the beast really had looked on the verge of death. Even if the sticky, clotted blood could be attributed to red

clay, it sure looked real.

But that wouldn't account for all her wounds. In particular, the woman's right arm was covered in lacerations that couldn't be easily faked. In fact—

Toshin fixed his eyes on the woman staggering up the steps. Even now her right arm hung limply at her side. Right before his eyes she fell over. Again, her right arm didn't move. The beast galloped over and tried to help her up. When she grabbed hold of its neck, it was with the same hand holding the lance.

Toshin instinctively looked for Gaishi's face in the crowd. Gaishi raced in from the rear and greeted Toshin with a nod. "It's okay. Get her. Put her under arrest. Don't kill her."

"But—" Toshin beseeched Gaishi.

From the entrance to the plaza came the shrill voice of the Registrar. "Kill her!"

"Don't kill her. Even if she is a rebel or insurgent, we'll need to question her."

Toshin nodded and set off in pursuit of the woman. Clinging to the beast's back, with one final burst of effort, she attempted to reach the highest level of the plaza.

Blocking her way was a large door. On the other side of the door, already above the Sea of Clouds, were the inner rooms of the Imperial residence. There another platoon soldiers stood at the ready. But whether or not they had become aware of the tumult—

No, thought Toshin. If they opened the gate without being fully appraised of what was going on, the woman would try to slip through to the inner palace.

In the very moment these concerns occurred to him, the side gate budged. Perched on the beast's back, the woman made a beeline for the side gate and barreled through to the inner palace.

Cries of dismay arose around him. Calls of shock and censure from above him. These sounds ringing in his ears, Toshin bolted up the steps and reached the side gate. At the same time, the beast's scream hit Toshin like a fist to the solar plexus. The soldiers on the other side of the gate must have finished them off.

Feeling like he'd swallowed a bucket of lead, Toshin stumbled through the side

gate. Inside was the *Roshin*, the vestibule leading to the inner quarters of the Imperial residence. Partitioning the spacious balcony was a high barrier wall, beyond which soared the edifices of the *Seishin*, the empress's personal domain.

These areas of the palace were off-limits to most of the high officials of the Kingdom, not to mention Toshin and his fellow soldiers.

The beast had collapsed on the cobblestone path leading to the *Seishin*. Many barbed grappling hooks had been flung across its body to restrain it.

"No! Don't kill it!" came Gaishi's voice.

The soldiers surrounded the beast looked around in surprise. As Toshin came adjacent the encircling cordon of soldiers, one was thrusting the tip of his lance against her neck. He yanked it out at once. The woman's body convulsed. Angry epithets arose from the cordon of soldiers.

The shrill, foul-tempered voice of the Registrar rang out from the gate. "Kill her!" he screamed.

Commands to kill and not to kill—the woman and her beast still attempting to flee—the cordon of agitated soldiers pressing in on them—in the height of the panic and confusion, a clear voice rang out.

"What is all this commotion about!?"

Toshin breathed a sigh of relief. The figure approaching the cordon was a big man holding a big sword in one hand. The Daiboku of the Ministry of Summer. He was attached to the security detail charged with the protection of the empress and the other court nobles. Among them, the Daiboku specifically shadowed the empress in the course of her daily routines and served as her personal bodyguard.

In terms of actual social class, he never rose above that of a lower-ranked baron. But this Daiboku had the special trust of the empress. When out of the public eye, he never strayed far from her side and took command of her junior retainers.

Even now the Daiboku was accompanied by three retainers.

"A rebel!" the Registrar called out.

"A visitor!" Gaishi rejoined.

The Daiboku blinked and looked for himself. "Rebel or visitor, which one is it?"

"Not a visitor!" came that screeching voice. The Registrar again. "She feigned being a visitor to invade the palace!" The Registrar went on at length about the circumstances that had brought about the current state of affairs.

In the midst of the narrative the Daiboku held up his hand, indicating that he'd heard enough. "It'll be faster if I ask her directly."

With that the Daiboku strode toward her. Toshin threaded his way between the bewildered soldiers and stole to the woman's side. He retrieved the lance that had fallen from her grasp and took the opportunity to examine her more closely.

*Not a lie. And not a staged performance.*

Blood indeed stained her torn, filthy clothing in its grotesque patterns, taking on the color of iron as it clotted and dried. The remnants of the leather armor barely hung on her body and her right arm lying against the stones was bound tightly with a cord. Beneath her torn sleeves her forearm was withered and black. Necrosis was setting in.

She wasn't human. If she hadn't been a wizard she'd be dead by now.

"He'll do all right by you," Toshin whispered. Sprawled on the cobblestones, the woman looked up at him through the veil of her unkempt hair. "He's got the trust of the empress."

The woman bowed her head as if to thank him. Groaning, she righted herself and turned to face the Daiboku. The Registrar was still shrieking at them but the Daiboku ignored him and knelt down on the cobblestones.

"So how'd you end up like this?"

"I know there can be no excuse for the manner in which I forced my way through. I deeply apologize for the confusion and disorder I have caused. But please understand that there is no malice in my heart."

The Daiboku nodded. Some of the tension drained from the woman's countenance. She bowed deeply. "I am a general of the Provincial Army of Zui in

the Kingdom of Tai. My name is Ryuu Risai.”

From the look on his face, this was the last thing Daiboku had expected to hear. Risai looked earnestly up at him. “There is a matter of the utmost importance that I must humbly discuss with Her Highness. I am aware of my impertinence, but I seek the honor of an audience with the empress.” She prostrated herself before the Daiboku. “I humbly place this petition before you. If you would please communicate this message to Her Highness.”

The Daiboku gave Risai a hard look and then nodded firmly. He glanced at Toshin. “Give her a hand, will you? Find someplace for her to lie down—”

Risai voice interrupted him. “I have no time for rest!”

“I’m not putting you under arrest. You need rest and medical care.” The Daiboku smiled. “I’m the Daiboku. Koshou’s my name. I’ll carry your petition to the empress, so relax. I’ll send somebody for a doctor.”

“What?” The Registrar raised his voice. “What are you thinking? This person approached the Forbidden Gate without permission, invaded the premises, scattered the troops, polluted the palace grounds, and damaged the dignity of the empress! Inconceivable! She should be hauled out of here and dealt with promptly!”



Koshou looked at the Registrar, clearly taken aback. “Hey, watch your language! She may be a general from another kingdom. Don’t be so rude!”

“What general? I don’t see any general! Only an imposter!”

“Yeah, but—”

“Perhaps the Daiboku is mistaken. Determining the bona fides of all visitors and deciding upon their disposition is the duty of the Registrar. Just because you’re on good terms with the empress doesn’t mean you can stick your nose into the business of other ministers!”

“What’s your problem with her bona fides!?” Koshou roared. Cowed, the Registrar retreated. “You think the empress is going to be happy if we just throw her out on her ear? Eh?” Koshou nodded his head toward Toshin. “Get a move on. Her *kijuu* as well,” he added, indicating the beast. “Make arrangements for whatever care they need.”

Toshin nodded and put his hand on Risai’s shoulder with the intent of helping her to her feet. She gently brushed it away.

“No, you’ve got to take it easy.”

Risai shook her head and attempted to pursue Koshou, who was already leaving at a brisk walk.

“You can’t keep doing stuff like this. If the Daiboku hadn’t shown up—”

“Yes, I know,” Risai said, turning to Toshin. “I can’t thank you enough for your kindness, but providing that the empress should not become enraged at my sulling the palace any more than I already have, I should hope to accompany the Daiboku to see her.”

“But—”

“Please. If I don’t see her now, I doubt I will be able to again.”

She clung to him as if clutching at her last straws. Toshin gulped. Risai’s face was white from loss of blood. Her lips were turning blue. She struggled for each breath, the air wheezing weakly in and out of her lungs. Her shoulders and arms were growing cold.

*This woman does not have many more hours of life left in her. “Daiboku!”*

Toshin shouted, putting his arm beneath her shoulders to prop her up. "Please allow her to go with you."

"What's this?"

"She's simply not going to settle down unless you do."

Perhaps implicitly understanding the press of time and seeing the look of desperation on her face, Koshou nodded. He handed his sword to one of the retainers, reached out, and took the woman in his arms.

# Chapter 3

[1-3] The empress's private rooms, called the *Chouraku-den*, were located in a part of the inner palace known as the *Seishin*. The Imperial living quarters were located at its locus, and all the other buildings of the Seishin were organized around and in reference to it.

While every palace in every kingdom had its own peculiarities, their overall structures remained the same. Consequently Risai had a good idea of where in the Seishin she was being taken. In the Kingdom of Tai, unlike most palace officials, Risai was allowed the special privilege of entering the Seishin.

The Daiboku named Koshou carried Risai on his back straight from the Forbidden Gate to the Seishin. They passed by the other structures and crossed a great covered arcade to a building that overlooked the resplendent facade of the multistoried Chouraku-den.

By Risai's calculations, she had arrived at an antechamber of the conservatory. The conservatory, or *Ka-den*, was separated from the Chouraku-den by a wooded park. The park was quite large. Furthermore, a wall had been erected down the center separating the Imperial living quarters from the conservatory. To get from the one to the other thus required going around the park.

Risai couldn't help wondering how long that wall had been in place. She found it a depressing sight. No matter how cordially she was treated, she knew she'd never be permitted to enter the Imperial living quarters. She'd only gotten this far thanks to the remarkable forbearance of the Daiboku.

What remaining strength she had was draining from her legs. Even supported by Koshou, she could barely stay on her feet. She risked toppling over at any moment. Perhaps observing this, Koshou said, "Why don't you sit down?"

Risai shook her head. She could not behave any more discourteously than she already had. The realization that she was in no condition to meet the ruler of any

kingdom weighed heavily upon her. The necessity of her actions notwithstanding, breaking through the Forbidden Gate itself was an offense deserving of the death penalty. She resolved that should not add to her sins now. If she could not draw the line on her dignity at some minimum point, then the entirety of her purpose for coming here would lose all meaning.

She planted herself firmly on the floor. The retainer who'd gone ahead of Koshou returned and whispered something in his ear. Though Koshou was still holding Risai erect and only a foot at most separated them, she couldn't understand what the retainer was saying. For the past few minutes, a low ringing in her ears jumbled all the sounds she heard.

Where was the empress? Had she even left her living quarters? Was she changing her clothes before meeting Risai? How long was Risai going to have to wait here?

These thoughts burning in her mind, she saw Koshou and the others turn their attention towards the door. Through the open doorway she observed a group of retainers and court ladies advancing along the corridor that faced the inner courtyard. The retainers in the room cleared the pathway to the door and bowed their heads. Risai felt her expectations rising.

But no noblewoman appeared in the midst of the coterie, nor did they appear to be leading a imperial processional. At the head of the group was a young woman wearing the ordinary court dress of a government clerk or minor lady-in-waiting. She entered the room at a brisk pace.

There were no signs of anybody else coming. Risai clung to Koshou, standing on tiptoe as she searched the corridor behind them.

Her vision grew dim. She channeled all her energy into her left arm and dug her fingers into Koshou's shoulder but felt her knees buckling. How many more footsteps did the empress have to take until she arrived? It shouldn't be long now. Each footprint was a battle against time.

*Please come.*

The young court lady reached out her hand. Feeling her touch, Risai glanced at her. The brilliance of the girl's scarlet hair practically burned her retinas. Her green eyes etched their surprising vividness onto her mind.

"Koshou, why won't she lie down?" the girl asked, offering her own shoulder to support Risai's right arm. The girl continued, "My name is Youshi. I am Empress of Kei." [Youshi is the Chinese pronunciation of Youko's name.]

Startled by the clarity in her voice, Risai turned her head to look at her. The girl said, "Rest assured that I shall take into consideration all the circumstances that brought you here. But for the time being, let's get you to bed."

The energy left her arms. Risai fell to the floor. Still, she managed to twist her body into a kowtow. "I have come here to most humbly beg a favor of the empress."

"Oh, there's no need to abase yourself so," the empress said, kneeling next to Risai.

Risai raised her eyes. "*Please. I beg of you. Please save the Kingdom of Tai!*"

The empress's fixed her gaze on Risai, her emerald-green eyes filling with evident surprise.

"I know that what I am asking of the Empress of Kei is well beyond the bounds of reason. But we are already—"

Risai choked off the rest of the sentence. The Kingdom of Tai floated in the midst of the Kyokai, isolated off its northeast coast from the rest of the continent. It was a cold country, completely frozen over during the winter. But there remained the people of Tai. Six years before a new emperor had ascended the throne. Then, not long after the onset of the New Year, he was lost.

Without the emperor to intercede, the divine protection of Heaven was lost as well. Tai became an island jail, beset by calamities and harried by youma.

"The people of Tai lack the means to save themselves. Youma multiply along the coasts. Fleeing the country has become impossible. Nothing can survive in Tai."

All the rage and grief stored in her heart for so long burst forth and lodged in her throat in a cold, hard mass, choking off her breath.

"The emperor was driven from the palace by treasonous rebels. No one knows where he and the Taiho now are or how they are faring." Risai flung herself at

Youko's feet, pressing her forehead to the floor. "The Hakuchi has not fallen from his roost!"

The emperor was not dead, the fate of Tai not yet sealed.

"Please—" But there was no air left in her lungs. She tried to inhale. Her throat clamped shut. Her breath whistled uselessly from her mouth. Black spots bloomed ominously before her eyes, swelling and plunging her into total darkness. All she could hear was the sharp buzzing in her ears.

*Please help us,* she intended to say. She could not be certain whether the words left her mouth.

# Chapter 4

[1-4] Risai's ears were still ringing.

No, she thought, it was the sound of the wind. The freezing winter wind of Tai whistled outside the door. This winter had been unusually harsh. The strong, swirling gusts cut through the body like cold, sharp knives. Exposed to the moaning, howling wind, the trees and mountains and rivers froze solid white.

The rivers iced over and the snow piled up. Drifts accumulated on the roads and highways, covering the hard ground beneath a frigid blanket. Strong winds scoured the surface, whipping up biting curtains of white.

Orphaned from the continent, the Kingdom of Tai sat alone in the Kyokai. During the winter, stabbing winds blew in from the northern seas. The towns and hamlets crouched beneath the snow, the windows and doors of the houses boarded shut.

In the small spaces within, separated from the outside air by layer upon layer of protection, glowed a small, warm fire. The people huddled together, shoulder to shoulder, sharing that small portion of the warmth—small indeed compared to the storms outside—among each other.

The flames of the fire, the mutual body heat, the steam rising from the kettle on the brazier—these too were freely shared with the shivering stranger who ducked in from the snow-covered roads. Though harsh and demanding, Tai winters were also filled with warmth.

And sometimes they took on the shape and form of brightly-colored flowers, Risai thought as she observed the figure of a child bounding towards her.

"Risai, here—" he said, handing her a bouquet of red and yellow flowers bigger than his own face.

In the cool room, barely illuminated by the weak rays of the sun, the flowers

were like luminescent candles. The sound of the wind coursed through the walls. The Tai winter had just begun, so the mountains and fields were only thinly dusted with snow.

Such brilliant flowers could hardly be expected to bloom this time of year. Surprised, Risai turned to her benefactor. The smile of the child grasping the bouquet was brighter and warmer than the flowers themselves.

“Congratulations. I was so happy to hear you’d been promoted to general in the Provincial Guard.” Relating this news with his beaming smile was Taiki. He was still ten years old at the time.

“These are for me?”

“Of course. I asked Gyousou-sama and he got them for me,” the young Saiho said with a bashful nod. “Back in Yamato, where I’m from, we give people flowers in celebration. I guess it’s not really done here, but I wanted to give Risai a bouquet. Since you’ve barely moved in, I thought the flowers would look all the nicer.”

“Well—” smiled Risai.

They were sitting in the parlor of her new official residence. Only a month had passed since the enthronement of the new emperor, Gyousou. Risai was appointed general of the Zui Provincial Guard of the Center and had just moved to her living quarters in Hakkei Palace.

The Saiho was second in importance to the kingdom only after the emperor. The Saiho was also Province Lord of Zui, where Risai now resided, and commanded its forces. She was delighted and honored that he would pay her a personal visit.

A retainer arranged the flowers and placed them on a shelf in the parlor. That alone made the room so much more pleasant. Though having only just arrived and not yet used to her surroundings, she sensed that might still make this residence her own.

“I’m really grateful. I’m truly blessed to have the Taiho take such a kindly interest in me.”

“Me too. I’m still a kid and I don’t understand a thing about all this

government and the military stuff. That's why you becoming general of the Provincial Army is so reassuring." The Saiho plopped himself into a big chair and bowed his head. "I, um, look forward to working with you."

"Please, the Saiho really shouldn't be bowing head to the likes of me."

None exceeded the rank of Saiho except the emperor himself. It was impossible to imagine that he should normally bow to a mere Provincial Guard general such as herself.

"Well, I'm not kowtowing. I'm simply being polite. So it's okay. I know it's considered out of order, but it's become something of a habit. Gyousou-sama says it is what it is and I shouldn't get worked up about it. So neither should you, I think."

"All right then," said Risai, suppressing a smile.

This small Saiho was born in another world. She'd heard that he was born and raised in Yamato, the legendary kingdom at the furthest reaches of the eastern seas. That accounted for some of his more eccentric mannerisms, though Risai found them rather endearing. He was a kind and gentle soul.

"I've got a lot more, you know," Taiki said to Risai with a bright smile. "We've got something of an oversupply in the flower department. Headmaster Seirai has a whole bunch of celebrations planned, but I couldn't wait so I brought them here."

When Gyousou was a general, Seirai had been his aide-de-camp. Following the change in government, he was put in charge of Taiki's education, and at the same time served as the Minister-in-Chief of Zui Province. Though he was a good-natured person, among the bureaucrats serving under Gyousou he was renown as one of the best and the brightest.

"Seirai and I really wracked our brains about what would be best way to celebrate. Gyousou-sama said that I could take whatever I liked from the Imperial Repository, but that just made deciding all the worse. There's so much stuff there it makes your eyes spin."

"Oh, you shouldn't waste such things on me!"

"Gyousou-sama said he didn't care. He said to choose some to send on his

own behalf as well. It's Gyousou-sama's share and Seirai's share and my share too. So don't be too surprised."

Risai looked at the brimming, cheerful countenance of the small kirin, feelings of thankfulness filling her heart. "I really have been blessed with great fortune."

She was truly happy. With the emperor and Saiho extending their best wishes to her in such a manner, a new future reached out before her. The Imperial Court would quickly be put in order and the people of Tai would welcome their new emperor. A bright and inviting future awaited them.

The kingdom and the people would prosper and be happy. To the bottom of her heart Risai was certain it would be so. Not in her darkest nightmares could she imagine that in a few short months all her dreams would turn to dust.

Her noble visitor left at least this room of her residence glowing with a warm light, while outside the cold winds blew. The light surrounding Risai vanquished the shadows. But she couldn't forget the storm brewing beyond the door. A storm that froze everything it touched: the kingdom, the hills and dales, the streets and cities. The people.

There could be no doubt about the sound of the wind that day, bearing the piercing cold on its back, availing itself of every opportunity to extend the reach of its icy touch. The whirling, howling wind seeped inside the ears and played its discordant song.

Enveloped by the festive spirits, Risai was not aware of the wind. But here and there in her new home, the coldness hung in the corners and clung to the walls. Her feet were long to warm and the chill bit at her fingers. Her limbs were heavy with numbness, her senses distant. The only sensation alive in her was the raw, cutting cold.

Like now. She was so very, very cold. She was freezing to death, along with the kingdom and its people.

*I'm so cold—*

"Are you awake?" a voice asked cautiously.

Or that's what she thought she heard. Concentrating with all her might, she managed to crack open her heavy, cold eyelids. Through the dark shadows of her

eyelashes appeared the worried face of a girl.

“Oh, good,” the girl said.

The girl pressed something cold against her face. A chill shook her from the marrow of her bones. The icy thing causing it was pressed against her face. That’s right—she was—

“The empress—” Risai muttered, coming back to herself. She probably didn’t even hear her own self say it. She opened her eyes wider and searched the face of the girl. She saw no sign of that brilliant red hair.

“Please rest. You’re in no condition to get up.”

Only when the girl cautioned her did Risai realize she was attempting to get out of bed.

*But I’m still alive.*

The girl pressed her cool palm over Risai’s hand. The cool touch of her skin relieved her mightily. So chilled and so cold, yet the girl’s icy hands felt so pleasant.

The girl rested her gaze on Risai and said slowly and deliberately, “You got here in one piece. Her Highness will meet with you whenever she can. So take it easy and close your eyes.”

“But—I—”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Go back to sleep, okay?”

The girl took Risai’s hand in her own and placed it against Risai’s throat. There she folded Risai’s fingers around a round object resting against the hollow of her throat. It was even colder than the girl’s hand and engendered within her an even stronger sense of relief. Then she finally understood that her body was burning up, arousing the pain of fevers and chills.

“You really must rest. You’ll be fine. Youko won’t forget about you.”

*Youko*, Risai repeated to herself. Her tongue felt like it was sticking to the roof of her mouth.

“She’s not here right now, but she’s repeatedly stopped by to see how you’re

doing. She really is concerned about you. You've got nothing to worry about. You're going to be all right."

Instead of nodding, all Risai could do was relax her brows. Her eyelids closed of their own accord. She heard the sound of the wind. But whether this was the sound of the winter wind raging at the door or simply the sound of the roaring in her ears—

*This is no time to sleep,* Risai told herself.

"If I am unable to meet with the Imperial Kei—"

"Risai, anything but that!" The voice mingling with the sound of the wind was suffused with grief and heartbreak. In her mind's eye, woman's face pulled into focus, on the verge of tears. "What a wretched and terrible thing to do!"

"Yes it is," Risai said, nodding her head and turning to face the empty air.

*I know the awfulness of what I am doing, Kaei.*

# Chapter 5

[1-5] “The new emperor ascended the Tai throne some seven years ago this fall. His name is Saku Gyousou.”

The matter-of-fact voice echoed around the room. They were in a building called the *Sekisui-dai*, a section of the library found at the back of the Inner Palace. Though not to the same extent as the world below, the heavy heat particular to summers in Gyouten stagnated in the snug room.

The rear windows faced a rock wall covered with moss and ferns. A delicate, white waterfall tumbled down the wall to a small, clear lake spreading out below the balcony, dappled with the sunlight streaming through the greenery. The sound of water mingled with the songs of the birds floated on a cool breeze through the open windows.

“He served under the previous emperor as general of the Regiment of the Left in the Palace Guard. He served with loyalty and distinction and was loved and respected by both his soldiers and the people of the region, sufficient that his fame spread to other kingdoms. Almost as soon as the previous government collapsed, that General Saku should be the next emperor was widely rumored about.”

“He sounds like a remarkable person,” Youko said in admiration, a touch of envy in her voice.

“Indeed,” agreed Chousai Koukan, Minister-in-Chief of the Rikkan. “Following the demise of the late emperor, he continued to prop up the Imperial Court. Everybody had high expectations for him. As soon as the Yellow Flag was raised, he journeyed to the Yellow Sea and made the pilgrimage to Mt. Hou. There he was anointed by Taiki and acceded to the throne. He’s been called a *hyoufuu* emperor.”

“A *hyoufuu* emperor?”

"Meaning a whirlwind emperor. He was chosen from among the first pilgrims traveling to Mt. Hou on the *shouzan*."

The kirin chose the emperor. Or rather, it was through the kirin that the Mandate of Heaven was expressed. The kirin were born and raised on Mt. Hou in the center of the world. When a kirin became old enough to choose the emperor, a flag was raised at the temple in the middle of the kingdom. All those desiring to be emperor journeyed to the Yellow Sea and set forth to Mt. Hou. There they met with the kirin, who ascertained the Divine Will on their behalf. This was called the *shouzan*, meaning the "ascension of the mountain."

"He was an emperor who ascended the throne like a sudden squall. It's said that a rain squall doesn't last the morning, and a raging heat quickly cools. Some also say that a whirlwind emperor will be a strong oak or a leaf in the wind. One or the other."

"Huh."

"On the other hand, seeing that over ten years had passed in the interim, perhaps calling the Imperial Tai a whirlwind emperor isn't entirely appropriate. In any case, The Taiho of Tai would be a fellow countryman of Your Highness."

"Ah," Youko said with a nod. "A *taika* like me. The Imperial En has said as much."

Youko was born in Yamato, the distant, mythic land at the far reaches of the eastern seas where the streets were supposedly paved with gold. But Yamato was not the actual land of her origins. Yamato was "there," and now she was "here." That was the only way she felt comfortable describing the difference. The one was always a dream world to the other, though rarely the two did intersect.

Youko had been swept away during one of those rare crossings of worlds, and then she had returned. That's what it came down to. She grasped that much in her mind, though she didn't yet feel it in her bones.

She'd been swept away while still in embryonic form. In this world, children were born from the *ranka*—the "egg fruit"—that grew on trees. When "here" and "there" crossed, the ranka that contained Youko was swept away to "there." She was "alive" but had not yet born. Her embryonic life found its way

to the womb of a Yamato woman and nine months later she'd been born.

Naturally, she had no memories of the ranka. As far as she was concerned, she'd been born and raised as an ordinary child. Even after learning that the truth of her existence was entirely different—even being brought here and told that she'd been “born” here and that she was the empress—it was no different to her than being dragged down an Alice-in-Wonderland rabbit hole.

Though she could hardly swear to it in court with a clear conscience, she probably *had* been born that way. She could hardly dismiss the reality of being *here*, and so that had to be the way things had been.

Which was how she dealt with her reality. She'd returned from *there* and reigned as empress now for two years. *There* had become the fantasy world. Being born and raised in the exotic land that was Japan had turned into a dream.

“Taiki is how old?” she asked herself.

Behind her Keiki answered. “I believe he was ten when the Imperial Tai was named emperor.” Keiki was the kirin of Kei who had brought Youko back from Japan and seated her upon the throne.

“The enthronement was seven years ago, so that’d make him about my age.” Knowing that another person shared the same dreams as herself, Youko felt a strange sensation come over her. Perhaps they dreamed of the same phantom country. Perhaps they even dreamed of the same places in that same phantom city. When she'd been a young child, another child like herself—a kirin—had been there too.

*How extraordinary.* According to what the Chousai and Saiho were telling her, this child of her dreams belong to her reality.

Youko knew of at least two other taika in this world: the emperor and Saiho of the kingdom to the north of Kei. Together they'd built a great, five-hundred year dynasty. They were taika, but the medieval Japanese they spoke was equally fantastic. Theirs was the ancient Japan she'd read about in history textbooks and seen in the illusions painted on the silver screen. It was all the same fantasy, but their Japan was not the same Japan that haunted her dreams.

She had acceded to the throne with the help of Enki and the Imperial En. The

stormy seas they had seen her through left her forever in their debt. But Youko had never felt the same way around them as she did now. She'd never felt that they'd emerged out of the same dream as herself.

But she and Taiki could have stood together at a crosswalk or passed by each other on the street.

He was the kirin of the Kingdom of Tai. He'd chosen the Imperial Tai, they had established the Imperial Court, and Risai—the general whose body was scarred from head to toe—had come to Kinpa Palace at the risk of her own life on their behalf

"Something on your mind?" queried Keiki, furrowing his brows.

Youko came back to herself. "Ah, no. It's nothing. I felt a little weird there for a moment. That's all." She smiled wryly. Concern showed on Koukan's face as well. "Sorry, Koukan. Where were we?"

"Taiki," Koukan said, looking at her. He glanced down at the manuscript. "A shoku transported him to Yamato where he was born a taika. After that, he returned to Mt. Hou. Though that was ten years later."

"Ten years later? And he's ten years old?"

"Yes, and—?" queried Koukan.

Youko shook her head. But when his taika was swept away and implanted in the womb of a human woman, a life *in utero* must have already been there. The implications came to her with something of a shock. The vessel that would become Taiki already existed in his mother's womb. It moved. It had a heartbeat that its parents could hear. In its place Taiki's taika took root.

But what happened to the life that was already there? Was it expelled by Taiki? Had she likewise been born after stealing the place of another? Thinking about her birth in these terms, she was overwhelmed by strange feelings of guilt. Though perhaps it was a mistake to think of the life there and the taika as two separate things. This was one question she couldn't expect to find an answer to here.

Youko again shook her head as Koukan turned to her with a puzzled expression. "I'm okay. Continue."

"Upon Taiki's return, the yellow flag was raised in Tai and the shouzan commenced. The Imperial Tai was forthrightly seated upon the throne. A record of the event remains in Kei. The Phoenix sang forth the name of the Tai Kingdom, announcing the ascension of the emperor. According to our records, the Taiho made an unofficial visit to Tai to deliver his congratulations."

When Youko cast a surprised glance over her shoulder, Keiki wordlessly confirmed that this was true.

"So we have diplomatic relations with Tai."

"Diplomatic relations—" Keiki echoed mostly to himself. "I was still on Mt. Hou at the same time as the Taika, Taiki's ranka. And when the shoku swept him away. When Taiki returned to Mt. Hou, I took the opportunity to return to Mr. Hou and met with him. Hence the ties between us."

"Wow," said Youko, the strange feeling returning. This child from her dreams had met with the kirin right there in front of her. "So that's why that woman—Risai—came to Kei? To petition Keiki because he's a friend of Taiki?"

Keiki tilted his head to the side doubtfully. "Hard to say. I haven't met with General Ryuu personally."

"But the Imperial Tai?"

"I have met His Highness. He struck me as an extraordinary person."

Koukan nodded his head as Keiki had done. "I don't know that we can term these two personal visits by the Taiho an establishment of foreign relations. Indeed, with Kei herself falling into chaos shortly thereafter, the Taiho was not able to congratulate the Imperial Tai upon his coronation. Neither do the ministers show any indication of having concluded their deliberations about whether or not to send an official envoy to express Your Highness's well wishes. In other words, we have not even established a sufficient diplomatic relationship that would allow us to exchange ambassadors."

Keiki apparently agreed with this summary of events. "In any event, the new emperor was enthroned. However, barely six months later, there came from Tai an Imperial Communiqué to the effect that the Imperial Tai had died."

"An Imperial Communiqué? What about the Phoenix? When the emperor

abdicates, doesn't the Phoenix announce the end of the regime?"

"You are correct. The Hakuchi sings forth when the emperor is enthroned, as he does when the emperor gives up the throne. The Phoenix then passes these tidings along. But this time the Phoenix did not sing. The Phoenix has not yet announced the end of the Tai regime. In short, I do not believe that the emperor has died or abdicated."

Youko rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. "I heard something similar from the Imperial En. The proclamation came that the Imperial Tai was dead, but it didn't ring true to him. If Taiki died, then the fruit of the next kirin sprout forth on Mt. Hou. But there is no sign of the taika at all."

"Yes. According to the communique produced by the envoy, only the Imperial Tai died. It did not touch upon the disposition of the Tai Taiho. However, no rumors about the disposition of the Tai Taiho have emerged since. At the same time, refugees began leaving Tai in droves. The word was the Tai Taiho had died, but seeing as the Phoenix has not announced his passing, I have to believe they were mistaken. Subsequently rumors about the coronation of a new emperor were noised about. In this case as well there were no envoys and the Phoenix made not a sound."

"What do the refugees say?"

"They are of many opinions. Some say a pretender has assumed the throne. Some say the Taiho has chosen the next emperor. And some say that were it simply a matter of the emperor passing away, then the throne would sit empty. But the vast majority believe there was a *coup d'etat* in the palace, the Imperial Tai was assassinated, and the Taiho has fallen into the hands of evil-doers."

Even in her own kingdom, it was difficult to communicate to the outside world exactly what was going on inside the Imperial Palace. Everything ended up as rumor and hearsay. The reason was that information was rarely imparted directly to the people.

Youko let out a breath. "No matter how I look at it, I can't believe that the Imperial Tai and the Taiki are dead. Risai said that the Imperial Tai was driven from the Imperial Palace. So that's got to be what happened. In short, there's a pretender on the throne. The pretender led the coup and drove the Imperial Tai

and Taiki from the palace.”

“I agree. Although a pretender is an emperor who lies about having received the Divine Mandate and then occupies a vacant throne. Strictly speaking, this is not a pretender but an usurper.”

“Oh, yes. Because the rightful emperor still lives.”

“That would be the case. General Ryuu commanded the Zui Provincial Army and Zui is the home to the capital of Tai. Having access to the heart of the palace, she could be expected to have the most accurate perspective about what was going on there. As I can see no discrepancies in her account, I find it difficult to believe she is lying.”

Youko frowned at Koukan. “But not impossible?”

“Should we at least try to verify what she has told us?” Koukan replied without hesitation.

Youko sighed. “Yes, of course. I did say I wanted to help Risai, but I really have no idea what to do. If this were only as simple a matter as a pretender.”

“Very true. We don’t even know what has become of the Imperial Tai or Taiki.”

“Asking Risai would be the most efficient thing to do. What does the doctor say?”

Koukan furrowed his brow. “So far he has nothing to report.”

“Oh.”

“There is something I’ve discussed with the Taiho. The Imperial Tai and the Tai Taiho have connections with the Imperial En and the En Taiho. Moreover, En has received the largest number of refugees. So an official request has been made to the ministries of Summer and Fall in En informing them of the circumstances involving General Ryuu thus far, and requesting any additional information about the situation. Their reply should not be long in arriving.”

Youko nodded. The Imperial Scribe entered the library to tell her that Risai had awoken. Youko hurried to the conservatory. By the time she got there Risai had drifted off to sleep again.

The doctor had been summoned at the same time and said that at this point

he still hoped for the best. “Because of the crown jewel, the *Hekisouju*, she should soon turn for the better.”

“I see,” Youko said with a nod, looking down at the face of the sickly and emaciated general. “That she would go to such extremes—” To rescue her kingdom she had suffered wounds across every inch of her body.

*I want to do whatever I can,* Youko told herself, but she didn’t know what that might be. Only that she must save the general. And Tai. And Taiki.

# Chapter 6

[1-6] Feeling herself slipping back into sleep, Risai focused her efforts on her eyelids, mustered her energy, and opened her eyes. She found herself cheek by jowl with a man's face. He craned his ear toward her mouth.

"You were mumbling something—" He drew back and smiled. "Ah, you're awake."

She thought she recognized the man but couldn't say from where. Over his shoulder, a girl rushed up and looked at her. Again Risai only sensed that she should know her somehow.

*What are these people doing in Hakkei Palace?*

She tried to remember, but her thoughts encountered only vertigo and her body grew short of breath. She was consumed by a raging fever. She hurt absolutely everywhere.

"Are you all right?" the girl asked with deep concern. "Do you understand me?"

The reality of her situation finally hit home. She wasn't in Tai. This was Kei. She had made it to Kei.

The man said, "I'm Koshou. Do you remember me?"

Risai nodded. Gradually her eyes widened and grew clearer. She was in a bedroom with a high, wide ceiling. Next to the bed was a black lacquered nightstand. The man sat on the edge of the nightstand and examined her face.

"Koshou-dono."

"Yep. That's me. You're a fighter, you are." He gave her a reassuring wink, obviously pleased by her improved condition. The girl standing at Koshou's shoulder dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve.

Risai was alive. That surprised her as well.

She weakly raised her arms above her head. Her left arm complied and appeared before her eyes. Her right arm did not. Her gaze traced an arc across her body to where the right sleeve of her nightgown lay empty on the quilt.

For some reason an apologetic expression rose to Koshou's face. "Push come to shove, we couldn't save your right arm. Honestly, there wasn't any life left in it. I know it's painful but don't despair."

Risai nodded. She'd suffered severely fighting off the youma, had lost her right arm and tied it off with a tourniquet to staunch the loss of blood. Gangrene set in. Of course she couldn't have expected the arm to survive. By the time she arrived at Gyouten it felt about ready to fall off. She had to wonder if it'd come off of its own accord or whether it'd been amputated.

And yet she didn't feel too broken up about the loss. Losing her dominant arm would of course end her career as a soldier. But what general, unable to save her liege, deserved to be called his retainer? She could live without it.

Koshou cradled her head in his hand and lifted her head. The girl pressed a warm teacup to her mouth. The liquid trickling into her mouth was sweeter and more delicious than anything she'd ever tasted before. But then as her tongue grew accustomed she realized it was only water.

The girl took away the cup. The man smiled. "Yeah, you're going to be okay."

"I—"

"I get why you'd do something so crazy and reckless. You got the words out before you collapsed. Youko's been by many times to see you."

"The Imperial Kei—"

"Providing the doctors don't say no, I'll go get her." Risai nodded. He released her hand and stood up. "Suzu, take care of her. As soon as I've called the doctors, I'll have a word with Youko."

"Sure. Make it quick."

Risai followed Koshou with her eyes to the door and then stared up at the ceiling. "How long have I been lying here doing nothing?"

"Oh, please. Don't say things like that. You needed a great deal of rest. It's been three days since you last opened your eyes. Since you collapsed it's been almost ten days."

"That long."

She'd intended to close her eyes only for a moment and had instead slept for days. All that time gone to waste. The wasted days pressed painfully on her chest. Risai raised her hand to her throat. She felt something round and smooth at her fingertips. She grasped it and focused her eyes on it. A round gem hung from her neck.

"Nobody but the empress is allowed to use it. But Youko—" A knowing smile came to the girl's face. "But the empress twisted a few arms at the Ministry of Winter and forced them to make an exception in your case."

"For me?"

"The Imperial Regalia of Kei, normally stored in the Imperial Repository. The gods have indeed smiled upon you. Had you collapsed in such a condition anywhere else or in any other kingdom, we might not have been able to save your life."

"Oh." Risai didn't know whether she should rejoice at such news or not.

*Kaei.*

When she closed her eyes she could hear nothing but the wind. The round gem at her fingertips was cold. A coldness that brought to mind the face of her friend.

*Kaei. I made it.*

The warm countenance of the civil servant a mere ten years her senior. As kind as her mind was keen, and so discrete as to almost appear timid. Risai had last seen her in Sui Province in the south of Tai. There they'd parted ways, and Risai had set her eyes upon Kei.

*Risai, anything but that!* Kaei had cried out, her body quaking in the wind. Her voice was soft but filled with fortitude. The resoluteness of her refusal showed in her voice and on her face. Risai was overcome by sorrow. She at least wanted Kaei to understand her.

"How could you do something so cruel?"

Risai and Kaei had fled their pursuers to a hill in Sui Province. They had come here intending to meet with the Province Lord. Shisen was the capital of Sui Province. Shisen's Ryou'un Mountain towered above them. It was spring in name only. The fierce winds buffeted them.

Looking back at where they had come from, they could see the small hamlet at the base of the hill. The fields surrounding the hamlet lay fallow. Several burial mounds had been built there and abandoned without so much as a prayer for the dead.

Kaei and Risai had walked through the hamlet before climbing the hill. The original landowners had deserted the place long ago. Instead, a small number of travelers sought warmth and shelter in the dilapidated houses. They had left their own home towns behind, escaping to any place closer to another kingdom.

Risai and Kaei had begged a few cups of thin gruel and listened to the stories and rumors the refugees had to share. They said that a taika sat upon the throne in Kei.

"One of my relatives' kids was in the port city. The word on the street there is that she's a young empress. Perhaps even the same age as the Taiho." The woman spoke listlessly. She was badly wounded. Sui Province was infested with youma.

It was said that the winds of oppression and subjugation sweeping over Tai had spared Sui Province alone. They'd left their home towns and fled here together, but a fortnight later these few alone had survived. The woman held a child wrapped in rags in her arms. Risai hadn't seen the child stir once since she and Kaei arrived.

"People say that if the Taiho is alive and well, that's how old he'd be."

Risai expressed her thanks for the gruel and left the hovel, a new sliver of hope in her grasp. Her mount was tied up in front. "A teenage empress. A taika—" she muttered to herself, taking up the reins.

Kaei turned to her with a puzzled look. "What do you mean by that?"

"What do you think? Do you think Imperial Kei might still harbor fond feelings

for the land of her birth?"

"Risai?"

"She might be homesick for Yamato, I mean. She might long for some connection to her life there. Don't you think so?" There was an additional note of enthusiasm in Risai's voice.

From the look on Kaei's face, she clearly didn't know how to respond.

"The Taiho is also a taika. They're close to each other in age. If the Imperial Kei learned more about the Taiho, shouldn't she want to meet him, want to help him? Not to mention that Kei has the full support of En."

Kaei gaped at her. "You're not really thinking of going to Kei to beg for assistance?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Risai, the empress could not violate the borders of another kingdom. And doing so under arms would provoke grave and immediate consequences. Dispatching troops to another kingdom is impossible."

"But you just heard them say so yourself! The Imperial En lent his support to Kei. The Imperial Kei was escorted to her ravaged kingdom by En forces."

"Those were unusual circumstances. The Imperial Kei sought asylum in En. I'm pretty sure it wasn't the Imperial En who crossed the borders to seek her out. In the end, the Imperial Kei borrowed the En Imperial Army and returned to her own kingdom. Here in Tai, however, His Highness is nowhere to be found."

"But—"

"You're familiar with Jun Tei incident in the Kingdom of Sai?"

"The Jun Tei incident?"

"Long ago, Jun Tei, the Sai Emperor, grieved by the ongoing chaos in the Kingdom of Han and desiring to save the people of Han, sent in his Imperial Army. As a result he met an untimely death. Even to spare the people of a kingdom, Heaven will not countenance the army of one kingdom crossing the borders of another. Do you think any other emperor wants to follow in Jun Tei's path?"

Risai shook her head. Then suddenly she looked up. "That's right. The Imperial Kei is a taika. Perhaps she's unfamiliar with the Jun Tei incident."

"You can't seriously mean to do anything so abject and cowardly!" Kaei's pale, exhausted face twisted with shock and repugnance. "Are you suggesting that Kei be sacrificed to save Tai? Because that's what it sounds like."

"That is the—"

"No, Risai. Anything but that!"

"But what becomes of our kingdom?" Risai exclaimed. Gripping the reins in her hands she motioned at the base of the hill. "Look at that hamlet. You saw the people living there. *That* is what Tai has become. No one knows the whereabouts of His Highness. No one knows the whereabouts of the Taiho. There is nobody left who can save our kingdom!"

She had searched. Even while being pursued, while being labeled a traitor, she had searched for them. But she could find no evidence of Taiki and Gyousou anywhere. Not a trace of them.

"Spring is coming, but where is there one field under the plow? If the fall does not yield a harvest, the people will certainly starve. If grain is not quickly stored away, the winter will come again. And with every winter, three more hamlets become two, and two become one. After this winter passes, how many of our populace will be left? How many more winters do you think Tai can survive?"

"But the ends do not justify causing Kei to sin against Heaven!"

"Someone has to come to the aid of Tai."

Kaei averted her eyes and shook her head.

"I am going to Gyouten," Risai said.

Kaei looked back at her, pain and grief in her eyes. "Please. Anything but that!"

"Fleeing to the territory of the Province Lord of Sui ensures little more than our own safety. And even our own safety is hardly guaranteed. Sui Province may sicken just like the rest of the kingdom. It likely will. Then all we'll be able to do is to run away again."

"Risai."

"There is no other path left to us."

"Then here we must part ways."

Kaei clasped her shivering hands to her breast. Yet even the sight of Kaei's face—on the verge of tears—left her unmoved. Risai nodded. "I must do this. I have no choice."

Risai met Kaei at the Imperial Palace. There they had forged a fast friendship and together were driven from the capital. Years passed. This winter, at long last, they had reunited in Ran, Kaei's home province. They'd somehow survived a winter there before their pursuers once again caught up with them. Together they'd managed to make it to the adjoining southern province of Sui.

Kaei looked long and hard at Risai. Then she pressed the sleeve of her cloak to her face and softly moaned. "Sui Province is infested with youma. As you head south, they will grow thicker and more fierce as you near the coast."

"I understand."

Kaei covered her face with her sleeves and lowered her head. When she raised her head again, there was a resolute expression on her face. This was the face of the accomplished individual who had risen from minister-in-chief of Ran Province to the top post in the Ministry of Summer in the Rikkan. She bowed once and turned her back.

*I truly am doing a despicable thing,* Risai thought.

All the better if the Imperial Kei was unfamiliar with the Jun Tei incident—and if she still held fond ties to the place of her birth—and if she could be incited by her emotions to save Tai. If she did, Kei would be destroyed. As soon as the Imperial Army crossed the borders of Kei, the Imperial Kei would soon follow the same path to destruction as Jun Tei. Even so, the Imperial Army would be left behind. A single division under her command was all she required.

She had resolved to do a terrible thing.

Resolved to the bitter end, Kaei did not look back or lessen her stride as she descended the hill toward Shisen. Risai watched her leave. Grasping the reins of her mount, with a heavy heart she turned her gaze from Kaei's retreating figure to that of Hien, her pegasus.

"I alone have lost my mind in my struggle to save Tai," she said, stroking the glistening black fur at its neck. "You remember him, don't you?" She pressed her forehead against its muzzle.

Inside her head, the high, joyous voice rose out of the darkness of her thoughts. *Risai*. He ran toward her at full tilt, as if about to dive headfirst into the ground. Soon he'd be asking if it was okay to pet Hien.

"You remember those small hands? I know you loved the Taiho very much."

Hien cooed softly in response.

"Shall we become the last fools left in Tai together, then? Shall we be on our way?"

Hien looked back at Risai with those deep, black eyes. Without a word it knelt and urged her to climb onto its back. Risai pressed her face against its neck and then leapt into the saddle. Taking up the reins she cast her eyes toward Shisen. There a forlorn, solitary figure stood looking back at her.

Kaei.

*Will you destroy Kei to save Tai?*

Risai eyes lingered vacantly on the ceiling of the bedroom. There, the face in her mind's eye looked down on her, clouded with loathing and contempt.

*But this is what I came here for.*

She'd arrived here with her life hanging by a thread. She'd only survived because the Imperial Kei had saved her.

Risai could not help but close her eyes. *This surely must be what I am fated to do.*

## Interlude

### Chapter 7

[1-7] Sanshi took a deep breath. The murky, golden gloom surrounded her. She was inside a narrow, endless “somewhere.”

*I made it in time.*

She had broken through without breaking free. She’d held on. A vague twinge of unease passed through her. She let the air out of her lungs, almost startled by her profound sense of relief.

A voice abruptly echoed from somewhere out of the amber darkness.

“This is—”

The surprised tone of the voice made her to take hold of her senses.

“—a cell.”

“Gouran.”

Had he accompanied her? Amidst all the confusion? “A cell?” Sanshi was about to challenge him, half in startled wonder, when she realized this as well. They were within the familiar confines of Taiki’s shadow.

In truth, Sanshi had no idea where they were—wherever the murky, golden darkness had descended. No earth and no sky, no beginning and no end.

Sanshi and the other magical *you-beings* did not sleep as did animals or people. There was no way of them to imagine such an analogy, but “sleep” was to them like a waking dream. She vaguely understood she was “somewhere.” But not what kind of place or its location. Whether the muddy, saffron mist was falling on them or whether the weak, golden light was radiating around them—

She couldn’t distinguish even that much.

Wherever they were was narrow and confining. It plainly felt so. And something firm and strong seemed to be holding them here. And that wasn't simply because, compared to its normal strength, the "golden" hue of the light was so terribly dim.

They were definitely enclosed in a kind of cell.

"This is—" she said, but she sensed no air passing through her throat. Only the thought. Perhaps only the *intent* to speak.

"What is this shell?" asked Gouran. But that equally may have been nothing more than the intimations of his voice. Confusion enveloped her.

"A shell—"

Her intuition told her this was Taiki. The thing surrounding them gave her every impression that this was Taiki. Testing this hypothesis, Sanshi tried pushing her consciousness beyond their confines. Normally, she should come into contact with ley lines entwining Taiki. But a vicious resistance blocked her.

"We can't escape his shadow!"

No, it was not impossible. Concentrating with all her might she somehow might be able to rupture these restraints. But she sensed that the effort would exhaust her. It would take an extraordinary amount of energy and no little pain.

And yet Sanshi had possessed every intent of surveying her surroundings.

The dim light reflected the weakness of Taiki's *ki*. Its bright source hidden from them, the frighteningly thin ley lines descended as if through a heavy downpour.

"We are closed in—"

Gouran's voice sent a chill down Sanshi's back. A kirin was one species of *you-being*. The energy required by these magical beings to transcend the pedestrian taxonomies of "human" and "beast" was bestowed upon them by Heaven. The thread of the spiritual energy infusing them was thin indeed.

The shirei lived off that energy. And yet in time like this it could not necessarily be counted on.

The opening through which that energy trickled was thin as well. The ley lines surrounding Taiki were no less weak. More critically, he could not tap into them

and access that psychic energy. Because he lacked the use of his horn.

They were slowly devouring themselves.

The more of Taiki's energy Sanshi and Gouran consumed, the less was left to Taiki. Not enough energy was left over to keep their threads of life alive.

Despite the presence of his enemies.

Enemies who'd attacked him. The sudden transformation to kirin. And the shoku rising out of his scream. Taiki could not have known how to create such a shoku. The power was given to kirin by Heaven, but Taiki didn't understand the powers of a kirin very well. The shoku he produced was purely instinctual. The severe wound he had taken to his horn must be related to it. That something so dreadful could have happened while Sanshi and Gouran were journeying to Gyousou was undoubtedly part of the same devious plot.

Some person or persons unknown had made sure that Sanshi and Gouran would not be at Taiki's side. And then took advantage of their absence to attack him. If the kirin died, so would the emperor.

*This is an insurrection,* Sanshi muttered to herself. But by whom?

In the midst of the shoku, Sanshi was sure she had perceived a single, lingering shadow. But she hadn't been able to ascertain its identity.

That must have been the assailant. Or perhaps the leader of the rebellion. Just as the rumors said, Gyousou had been lured to Bun Province, and Taiki had been inveigled to dispatch Sanshi and Gouran to Gyousou. As a result, they hadn't been there to protect him. Taking advantage of that opening, Taiki had been attacked. But the enemy didn't kill Taiki. If only by a hair, the assassination had failed. Their enemies could be mounting another attack even now. And yet here they were trapped.

"What should we do?" came Gouran voice from the midst of the saffron darkness.

"We must sleep."

Sleep consumed the least psychic energy. Not the sleep of beasts, which would leave them defenseless. They would rest their physical bodies while setting their

consciousnesses free to sense any attack.

"Remain vigilant. Our enemies may soon be upon us."

In a daze, drawn to the curtains of black and white funerary bunting, Taiki approached one of the houses. The crowds of people dressed in black reached from the front gate up to the *genkan*. The smell of chrysanthemums and incense hung in the air.

Then with a cry of surprise several of the adults rushed toward him. Through the crowds he could see a man and woman dressed in black.

Behind the sobbing woman was a picture frame wreathed in chrysanthemums. A photograph of an old woman. At last he understood the nature of the building in which the altar was located.

This was his home.

"Where have you been all this time?"

"What happened to you?

"A whole year has passed!"

Speaking as if in one voice, the sounds of the crowd washed over him like a wave. He was in danger of being inundated. Strong claws dragged him back to shore. The hands of the kneeling, weeping woman in front of him dug into his arms.

"Mother?"

He blinked. For the life of him he couldn't understand why his mother was weeping so. What were all these people doing here? What were they all shouting about? What were these black and white curtains for? Why was his grandmother's photograph being displayed like that?

He tilted his head to the side. A woman from the neighborhood asked him, "What have you been doing up till now?"

"Up till now?" he echoed.

A flood of memories coursed through his thoughts, vanishing before his mind could seize upon them, leaving behind a deep, empty space. A curtain of snow

danced at the bottom of that hole. Large, heavy snowflakes falling on a courtyard.

He'd been standing in the courtyard. His grandmother had scolded him and sent him outside. And—

"What I am doing in this place?" he asked the adults surrounding him. At the same time, a heavy lid closed in his soul. Everything about him that was *beast* and not human, together with his horn, was sealed tightly inside him.

"What do you mean, this place?" The woman shook his shoulders. "Don't you remember? You've been missing for a year. Your mother and father have been worrying themselves half to death."

"I have—?"

But he'd been in the courtyard until just minutes ago. He raised his arm to point the way and felt his hair that at some point had grown out. He grasped a lock of his hair in bewilderment.

"Most definitely," the old people standing next to him said, dabbing at their eyes.

"Your grandmother called to you. In the end she seemed to have caught but a glimpse of you."

With that, the old woman turned to the other people there. "Well, let's give the family some time alone for now. Let them say their final goodbyes before the funeral procession."

"Indeed," other voices agreed, and he was escorted along with his still weeping mother into the house.

His time *here* once again began to move forward. At the same time, so began the long absence of Taiki, the "other" and now forgotten part of him.



## Part Two

### Chapter 8

[2-1] The girl placed a pillow behind Risai's back. "Are you in any pain?"

By this point, Risai had grasped that the lady-in-waiting asking the question went by the odd name of Suza. As it things turned out, Risai wasn't able to see the Imperial Kei the last time she woke up. While being treated by the doctors, she fell into a long slumber.

She'd awoken several times after that, but the doctors said it was too soon for her to be seeing visitors. Another two days passed before they relaxed the prohibition.

"I appreciate all you've done for me."

For the first time in a long time she managed to sit up. Her body was weaker than she expected, and even leaning back against the pillow she felt winded. The doctors had not permitted her to leave the bed, so Risai had to meet with visitors in her sleeping quarters.

Suzu washed Risai's face, arranged her hair, and dressed her in a light tunic. She had apparently taken on the responsibility of looking after Risai by herself. Not much time had passed since the coronation of the Imperial Kei. This perhaps could account for the Imperial Palace being so short-handed.

Or perhaps Risai wasn't trusted, and guarding against the possibility that she might fall out of favor, they'd decided to restrict the number of court ladies attending her to one.

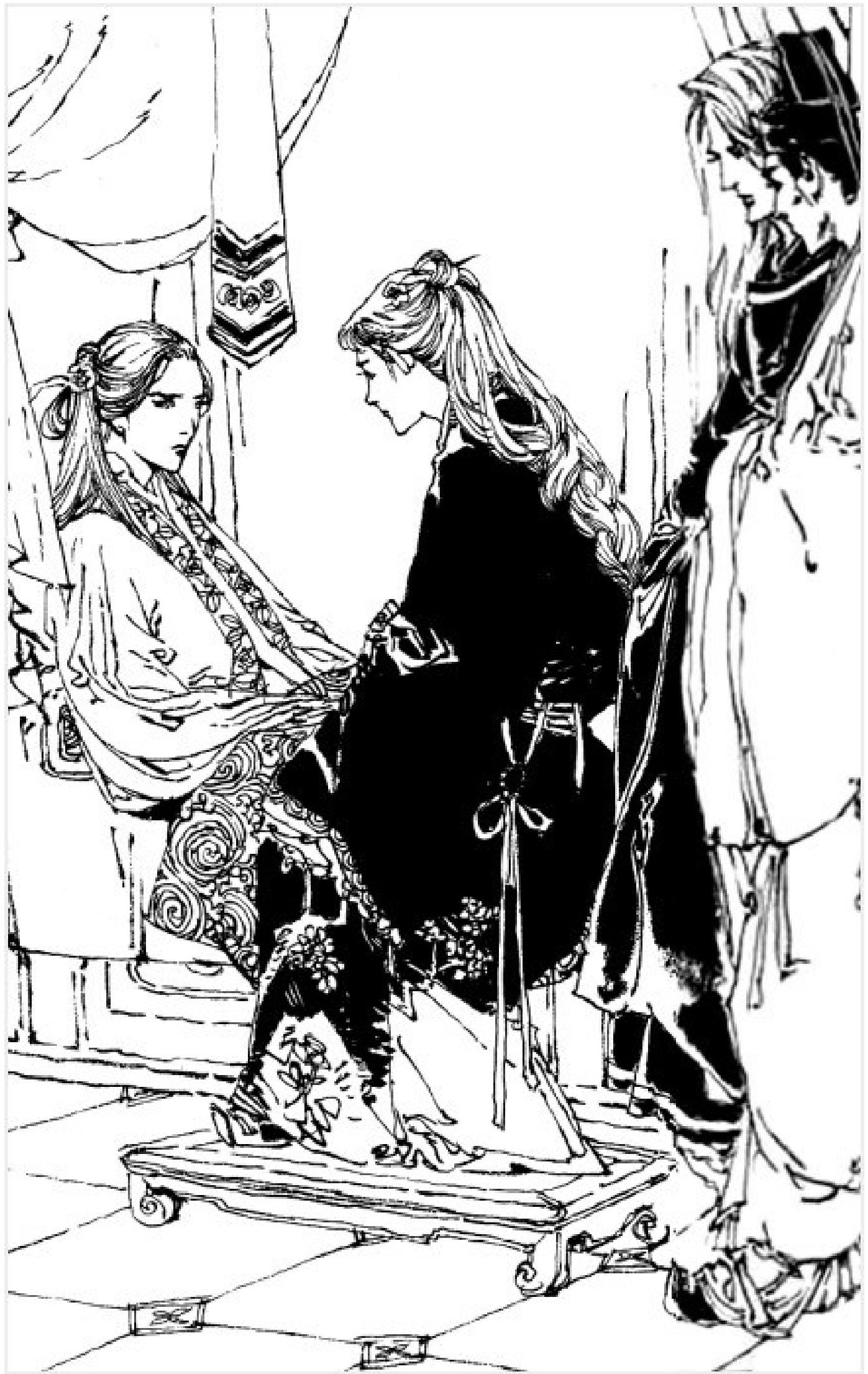
About the same time Suza had finished dressing her, three visitors entered the room. The first one to step into the room and take a seat next to Risai's bed was Youko, the Imperial Kei. There was no way Risai could forget her fiery red hair.

"How are you doing?"

"Because of Your Highness, I appeared to have escaped death. I thank you

from the bottom of my heart. Having been blessed by your extraordinarily good graces, I must beg forgiveness for appearing before you in such a slovenly manner.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I know you must have suffered a lot. Your recuperation is my first priority. I’d like to do whatever I can. If there is anything you need, please let me know. Anything at all.”



Risai estimated her age between sixteen and seventeen. The striking and unusual manner in which this young Empress spoke communicated great sincerity and good faith. She had imagined someone more frivolous and inconsequential. Risai was taken aback by the unexpected presence of an empress possessed of such soldierly fortitude.

She had a different air about her than Taiki. They both came from the same Yamato. Risai realized for the first time that she had simply assumed the Imperial Kei would be like him.

“Thank you very much.”

“Would you mind relating to me a bit of your story? If you find it trying, you need only say so.”

“Not at all. I came bearing a message to be expressly delivered to Your Highness.”

Youko nodded. She glanced at the two men standing behind her. “I thought it might be rude to bring men to a lady’s sleeping quarters, but I’d like them to stay, if you don’t mind. This is our Chousai. He goes by the name of Koukan. And next to him is Keiki.”

Here as well Risai realized the extent to which the totality of her understanding was based upon Taiki. She couldn’t help smiling sardonically to herself. *But of course.* The golden hair meant he must be a kirin. The Tai kirin was a black unicorn with hair like burnished steel.

“Your reputation precedes you, Kei Taiho.”

Keiki gave Risai a somewhat surprised look. Risai smiled in turn. “The Taiho—Taiki—spoke of you often. He said that he was fortunate to call the Kei Taiho a friend, that he was a magnanimous man who showed him every kindness. The Taiho seems to have developed a great affection for the Kei Taiho.”

As Risai spoke, Keiki averted his gaze with a conflicted look on his face. At the same time, the Imperial Kei cast a surprised look at him over her shoulder.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Have I said something unbecoming in your presence?”

“No,” Keiki muttered.

Youko smiled. "No offense given or taken. Such unexpected information simply startled me. In any event, I would like to learn more about what has happened in Tai, even if it limited to Taiki alone."

Risai nodded. "I'm not sure where best to begin."

The previous emperor of Tai was known posthumously as Emperor Kyou. He'd reigned for one hundred and twenty-four years.

Emperor Kyou loved pomp and splendor and drowned himself in luxuries. Though when it came to governance, he hewed to the straight and narrow. He housed his indulgent and merrymaking compatriots in the Imperial Palace, collected a harem of beauties in the Inner Palace, and exhausted the riches of the Imperial Treasury with the forbearance of a drunken sailor. But he never bestowed ministerial responsibilities upon such wastrels and philanderers, and never mixed the business of state with his pleasures.

"Sleep in the dark and rule in the light." That was his motto.

Setting aside the question of whether he could be called an enlightened statesman, while sitting in the Imperial Court, Emperor Kyou was not in any way deficient in his abilities. He respected precedent, principle, and order. He had no taste for revolution or sudden change, and quietly created a sound rule of law.

In the closing years of his reign, the treasury was bankrupt and the kingdom impoverished. Even then it was said that, compared to other kingdoms, the corruption of the national government of Tai was held to a minimal level.

And then, as if waiting for an opening, all those corrupt bureaucrats he had assiduously kept at bay devoured the regime.

After Emperor Kyou died, though the plundering spread far and wide, Tai held its ground. There remained many thoughtful and informed province lords and general and officials.

Gyousou was the best of them all. Originally a general of the Palace Guard, he was a trusted and favored retainer of the late emperor. He was well-versed in the operations of the government. He was possessed of many talents for which he was widely revered.

In the provinces, so was the legendary army of Gyousou, and its commanders

and officers.

Taiki pledged himself to Gyousou and he ascended the throne. He quickly organized the Imperial Court and guided Tai into a new era. Gyousou was said to have been preparing all along to occupy the throne. And in a sense that was true.

He understood that Emperor Kyou would soon lose the Mandate of Heaven. Whether or not he was enthroned as the new emperor, he knew that the stormy seas ahead could not be avoided, and that in order to keep the listing ship of state from sinking, a man of his abilities must stay lashed to the wheel.

Gyousou sought out and trained accomplished officers and commanders. The duchy of Saku County he ruled became Tai in miniature. Though the civil and military officials were mere county authorities, they comprehended the intricacies of imperial polity and grasped the conditions of the kingdom better than the Rikkan. In the waning days of Emperor Kyou's reign, they fanned out across the kingdom, serving as bulwarks shoring up the faltering regime.

At the same time, many more figured out that the days of Emperor Kyou were numbered. Risai as well saw that Emperor Kyou's regime was taking on water and would soon sink beneath the waves. The water would be up to their necks before long. Of this she was sure, but that was the only thing she could be sure of.

She hadn't thought seriously about what must be done after the emperor died. That the inevitable aftermath *must* be considered had not arisen in her thoughts. But it had in Gyousou's. That was the big difference between people like herself and Gyousou.

Gyousou went to the Imperial Court and did his best to keep things afloat. After Emperor Kyou died, his subordinates arrived to buoy up the sinking realm. They became the flagships of the new dynasty. Gyousou's Imperial Court was laying the strong keel of a new ship that would be nothing short of revolutionary.

Following the coronation of the new emperor, the Imperial Court was typically thrown into chaos. Finding the right people to serve as ministers of the Rikkan usually required a considerable amount of time, but that wasn't true of Gyousou. Compared to most kingdoms, Gyousou organized his Imperial Court

practically overnight. It was an unprecedented accomplishment.

The incident began half a year after Gyousou's coronation. A large-scale rebellion broke out in Bun Province.

# Chapter 9

[2-2] Answering the call to assemble, Risai rushed to the Inner Palace. When she entered in Inner Palace, the chief retainers had already gathered there.

“An insurrection in Bun Province?” were her first words.

Daishiba Haboku of the Minister of Summer said in response, “From the beginning, Bun Province has festered with one problem or another.” He drew his hand through his salt and pepper beard.

Located directly north of Zui Province in the northern quarter of Tai, Bun Province was a land beset by harsh winters. Jou Province spread out across the northeast corner of the island. The winters there were as bad, but Jou was blessed with arable land and expansive forests.

The craggy land in Bun Province, in contrast, made for poor farming and was sparsely forested. Its occupants scraped by mining the gemstone fountains that dotted the land. Those gemstone fountains had been exploited so long by so many that they were running dry. Bun Province was cold and poor, the government was in shambles, and the hearts of its people ran wild.

Or so the rumors said.

Nowadays, Bun Province was beset by rebellions and civil strife. Revolt was the common resort of a frustrated and stymied people. The productive gemstone fountains and mines were controlled by rebels and insurrectionists indigenous to the area, and feuds and fights over power led to larger conflagrations and often fueled the insurgencies.

“Ousting the Province Lord took some of the pressure off. The marquis had been as ferocious as any of the rebel leaders. When it came to the sheer brutality of his actions, he bested any insurrectionist. He kept the place under a tight rein.”

Risai nodded. The previous marquis was a cruel and crafty individual. In the best of times, he was a predator for whom the impoverished province of Bun served as little more than a field of prey. But even a man like him had his redeeming qualities.

"With the change in provincial leadership, the rebel factions grew all the more brazen. More than fomenting general disorder, the rebels have been stirring up the sort of trouble with county officials that threatens to turn into civil war. In any case, with talk of them occupying the county palaces and bringing neighboring districts under their thumb, these dogs cannot be allowed to sleep where they lay."

"We can't go adding more fuel to this fire. Not without first impressing upon them what manner of discipline the Kingdom is willing to impose."

The man speaking in a gravelly voice was General Ganchou of the Palace Guard of the Left. He was a big-framed fighter, full of vim and vigor. He didn't appear particularly gripped by any sense of panic. That was true of everybody there.

They'd all understood the nature of the situation from the start.

Since the beginning of the year, a wide-ranging political purge had been sweeping through Tai. It started with a systematic sacking of the more corrupt officials along with preparations to lure out those villains biding their time under the cloak of darkness. Sidelining the infamous Province Lord of Bun took the pressure off the lid. The criminal element in the pot had begun to boil over. Such a turn of events had been anticipated from the beginning.

"If we act with restraint, they will never take the Kingdom seriously. Such an outcome is intolerable. We should journey there at once and deliver a decisive blow. We must hit them with all the majestic terror of the Imperial Army."

"Of course, these rebels must be brought to heel, but how to strike with any kind of speed? The season must be taken into consideration. Ease up on the reins and the rebels in the various districts of Bun Province are certain to raise hell. Monkey say, monkey do. If they do us the favor of all following suit, we should be able to round them up in one fell swoop. Such a strategy would prove more effective in driving home the message that the eyes of the Kingdom are upon them."

Ganchou looked at Haboku in amazement. “The blood runs cold in your veins, old man. These brigands are controlling the towns and villages around the county palaces. Take some thought as to the disposition of our subjects who live there.”

“What are you saying? No man with a drop of warm blood or a tear in his eyes should serve the Ministry of Summer or command the troops.”

“You may be right on that one,” replied Ganchou. His big frame shook with nonchalant laughter.

“If an Imperial rescript is to be issued, the sooner the better,” Eishou coolly interjected. Like Ganchou, Eishou had once served under Gyousou’s command. Gyousou’s army had produced many famed soldiers, among whom Eishou was the youngest. “I’m of a species with the old man, without blood in my veins or tears in my eyes. If troops are to be dispatched, then I am inclined to do so with all due haste.”

Speaking with a touch of irony in his voice, Eishou knit the brows of his bloodless, tearless face. “Once the snow begins to melt, our troubles will begin. Not only will the roads become uncertain underfoot, but when the snow pack recedes the quarry will abscond to the mountains. The mountains in Bun Province are dotted with gemstone fountains and mines. Ferreting them out would prove no easy task.”

That was indeed the case, other voices chimed in. In her heart, Risai felt the same. Hiding in the mineshafts would raise great obstacles to their capture. In order to bring the heat to the bandits of Bun Province, they couldn’t mount an invasion in dribs and drabs, dragging the campaign out for months. Taking and holding the territory quickly—demonstrating the might of the Kingdom for all to see—was the way to subjugate the rebels. If not, deliberately dispatching the Imperial Army would be without meaning.

As if to seek out his judgment on the matter, the eyes of the people assembled there all turned to Gyousou.

“I’ll entrust the matter to Eishou. Muster the Army of the Center and bring Bun Province under your control.” At the same time, Gyousou fixed Ganchou and Haboku—who held a contrary opinion—with his gaze. “This is not to say

that I am necessarily endorsing Eishou's strategy. The problem of time, the problem of Imperial dignity, the problem of bringing the rebels into line—these are of little consequence for now."

"Of little consequence?" Eishou responded with a flash of indignation.

Gyousou nodded. "Not the most pressing of matters before us. The greatest problem we face is not the rebels but the people. More than the subjugation of the rebels, the people must be convinced that the Kingdom is capable of protecting them."

Risai started in surprise. Judging from the way the others drew in their breath, they had the same reaction. The room fell into a kind of abashed silence.

"Eishou, you will command the Army of the Center, including the Bun Provincial Guard, and pursue the rebels. A military victory is not necessary. Clean out the county palaces. After liberating the county seats, stay behind in Bun Province for a while. Lend support to the Provincial Guard and strengthen the defenses around the capital. There's no need to take unreasonable measures chasing down the rebels. More than that, under the rubric of showing an Imperial presence, make the people understand that the rebels themselves are not so fearsome. Calming the populace is the priority."

"Understood!" Eishou answered, obviously impressed. He wasn't the only one. All of Gyousou's subordinates had the utmost faith in his words. No matter how fierce the debates in the privy councils, Risai had come to understand that when Gyousou delivered his verdict, a unanimity of opinion quickly distilled.

Eishou mobilized the Army of the Center in short order and set off for Bun Province. It was about month before word arrived that he had liberated the county palaces and for the time being had pacified the surrounding countryside. And right on schedule came news that insurrections had broken out in other regions of Bun Province.

In at least three places, along with a number of smaller skirmishes. Rather than being set alight by chance sparks cast off by the wind, these sudden uprisings bore the marks of organized resistance. Before another fortnight passed, the situation had mushroomed, and it became clear that the initial occupation of the county seats were all linked to a province-wide internal rebellion.

Led by Sougen, the Zui Provincial Army of the Left was dispatched to Bun Province, joined by three regiments of the Palace Guard of the Right, commanded by Gyousou himself. The sporadic insurrections breaking out in the various locality joined forces, with the nexus of rebel activity gravitating to the vicinity of the county palace in Tetsui.

Tetsui was a city deeply connected to Gyousou.

Three of the six division leaders of the Imperial Army that Gyousou headed could boast of being undefeated in battle. The same could not be said of Gyousou's career as a general.

The one defeat experienced by Emperor Kyou's loyal General of the Left had been in Tetsui. Toward the end of Emperor Kyou's rule, Tetsui could no longer bear the exploitation by the emperor and shut off all lines of credit. They would no longer levy the Imperial tax. The Provincial Guard charged in to lay down the law, but citizens from the surrounding areas flocked to the palace and continued the resistance.

Gyousou and the Imperial Army were eventually ordered to the front in order to becalm the situation. When he arrived at Tetsui, Gyousou surrounded the city with the twelve-thousand, five-hundred soldiers of the Army of the Left, and ordered the entirety of the Provincial Guard to the rear.

The officers accompanying him, beginning with Ganchou and Eishou, took issue with this strategy. If two divisions of the Provincial Guard couldn't liberate Tetsui, then what could a single division of the Imperial Army accomplish?

"This is pointless!" Ganchou protested.

Eishou laughed through his nose. "Aren't you the humble one. Of course it isn't pointless. If we can't do this without two divisions of the Provincial Guard, what are we supposed to do when we face a real challenge? Though in any case this will take a bit of time. I don't look forward to encountering snow on the way back."

"Agreed," said the former general of the Zui Provincial Guard of the Left, now General Sougen of the Imperial Army. "If the mountains to our rear are closed by snow, neither supplies nor reinforcement will make in through in satisfactory numbers. We don't have the provisions to bivouac here in Bun Province until

spring. We must win a decisive victory and head back before winter comes.”

“We can be supplied by Saku County. I’ve sent orders to Seirai to open the storehouses and make ready the provisions that would be needed for us to winter over.”

“Surely you jest!” exclaimed Eishou, rising to his feet. “No matter how hard this campaign may prove, it shall not take until spring. Gyousou-sama surely expects more of us than that!”

“Expectations are beside the point. Worst case, I ask that you at least prepare yourselves for the possibility of us wintering over here.”

“If you think the going will be that hard, recall the Provincial Guard and get those idiots to pitch in. Although they’ll no doubt prove as useful as a boat anchor on dry land.”

“We shan’t be asking the Provincial Guard for assistance. The Provincial Guard has taken shelter in the nearby villages and towns along with the civilians. No matter how wide the storehouse doors are flung open, they can’t feed the local populace as well. We can’t very well be seen eating our fill alongside starving civilians. At the same time, we can’t pare down rations for the soldiers. That would be equally bad for their health and their morale.”

“Which is why we should take Tetsui as soon as possible. Scorch the earth in all directions and after that we could wrap up the whole affair in three days. Obtain the services of the Provincial Guard for a fortnight and the unruly mob would at least be useful as human shields.”

“Eishou, what do you think we came here to accomplish?”

“To subjugate the rebels.”

“And why did they rebel in the first place?”

Eishou was hard-pressed for a reply. Of course, there was no mistake that these were rebels. They had defied Imperial decrees and did not skirt the brand of insurrectionists. However—

“The summer was cool and Bun Province faces a hard winter. The provisions necessary to winter over are sparse. If we disperse the stores in the warehouses

in the name of Imperial decrees, the people will starve to death. That is not a tenable option. What others are available to us?"

Eishou raised his head. "His Highness has instructed us to put down the rebellion. Those who His Highness calls rebels are rebels to ourselves as well. That should be true of all the Palace Guard, should it not?"

*But of course,* Gyousou smiled thinly. "So you are the emperor's lapdog, then? But I ask you, what is an emperor in the first place?"

Eishou held his tongue.

"If the citizens of Tetsui were inflicting harm on people elsewhere, we should be ready to wipe them out to ensure the greater good. If the citizens of Tetsui rejected this forced servitude, the burden gets passed on to other cities in the county. Consequently we should force open the gates of Tetsui and the vaults of the treasury. But is there any need to exceed such measures?"

A silence descended on the camp.

"The Imperial rescript orders us to force our way into Tetsui and open the treasury. However, it says nothing about harming even one person in Tetsui." Declared Gyousou, "Soldiers are not permitted to carry swords. Shields may be deployed, but not swung or otherwise used against the citizenry with the intent of using them as weapons."

Shields were fashioned from rugged hardwood. Steel reinforcing was allowed on the inside of the shields, but not on the outside. Taking into account their civilian opponents when in the heat of battle hot-blooded soldiers were likely to lash out with their shields, the outside of the shields were covered with thick lamb's wool. The wool was white.

If, contrary to orders, a shield was used as a weapon and a civilian was injured—even a spot of blood staining the wool—the standing order was for that soldier to be punished severely.

Captured individuals were admonished and released. They could return to Tetsui if they so wished, or to the towns and villages in the countryside.

"I know how you must feel, groaning under the weight of so many taxes. But if the Imperial edicts are taken for granted, they would in a flash lose all the gravity

attached to them. Weary of the hard toil, if your inclination to pull your fingers from the dikes spreads far and wide, you will be ones who ultimately suffer. If the tax protesters in Tetsui go unchallenged, that burden will simply pass to the other citizens of the county. If you can grasp this principle, then should not the treasury be opened?"

Some returned to their town and villages. Some spoke of their will to return to Tetsui. At first the people were gripped by suspicions. But once they discerned the willingness of Gyousou's soldiers to stay their hands, they gave more thought to Gyousou's intentions.

The siege went on for forty days. The Imperial Army repeatedly threatened to force their way into the county palace and retreated. Their shields remained white and unblemished. As the people of Tetsui tested the limits of the "liberating" Imperial troops, this was communicated to Kouki, and the will of the emperor continued to be assessed.

A mutual compromise became inevitable. Gyousou's soldiers would not be deemed "victorious," but neither would their campaign be called a failure. On the one hand, the besieged citizens of Tetsui had to face the impossibility of keeping the treasury closed. On the other, the emperor had to face the reality that his own Palace Guard were in an unwinnable draw.

Finally, on the forty-first day of the siege, the palace gates were opened. But not as the result of conquest on the field of battle.

Gyousou passed through the mountains as the first snows of winter fell. He returned to Kouki and there gave an accounting of his "defeat." His soldiers had taken ten thousand blows and returned not a one. However, the treasury had been liberated because the people had chosen the right path and opened it themselves. The people of Tetsui preserved the Divine Will.

As a result, the taxes were collected and this "defeat" was set aside, the ends having been said to justify the means.

Subsequently, the expression "A Tetsui Shield" circulated through the northern districts of Tai, also known as the "White Wool Shield." It meant a sign of good faith, as in: "If you wish us to take you seriously, show us a Tetsui Shield."

Gyousou and Tetsui were bound by the bonds of good faith. When Tetsui was pulled into the vortex of war, Gyousou could not turn a blind eye. Together with Sougen and twenty-thousand soldiers under their command, they set out for Bun Province.

Risai wrapped her arms around Taiki's shoulders as they watched them leave.

"Gyousou-sama is going to come back safely, right?" The young kirin looked up at her, worry etched on his face.

Risai nodded with confidence. "Everything's going to be all right, Taiho."

*My assurances have all been turned into lies,* she knew when she thought about it later.

The chaos had from the first been carefully planned to drag Tetsui into the middle of the conflict. And that couldn't have resulted from the violent clashing of mere rebels. The rebels had been organized and given direction and guided from the shadows. The person standing in the shadows had anticipated that Gyousou would not abandon Tetsui to its own devices.

The second time around, Gyousou did not return to Kouki.

# Chapter 10

[2-3] A questioning voice brought her back to her senses.

Risai?"

The Imperial Kei was looking at her, concern etched on her face. *What should I tell her?* Searching for the words, Risai found herself falling back into her own memories.

"Are you not feeling well? If so—"

Risai shook her head. "I beg your pardon. It's just that I've had a lot on my mind."

*I understand,* Youko said with a nod of her head.

"You inquired as to what was happening in Tai. In short, there was a coup d'etat. His Highness was drawn out of the capital to a rebellion in one of the provinces and disappeared."

In a simple and forthright fashion, Risai outlined the nature of the conflict.

"Even I am unaware of the specific details. I have subsequently learned that he managed to make it to the outskirts of Tetsui and set up camp there. They were attacked. At the height of the battle, he vanished from sight. Not a word has been forthcoming about him since."

"Nothing more? Not a single word?"

"There is likely more to know. I haven't been able to meet with people who were in Bun Province at the time, who would have more precise information about the incident. I don't know if others have investigated the matter closely, or whether a search is underway. It is possible that nothing has been done at all. When I was informed that His Highness had disappeared, the Imperial Court was in an uproar. Nothing could get organized in a systematic way. Nothing could get

accomplished."

"Why?"

"Because of the *shoku*."

The shoku occurred a fortnight after Gyousou departed for Bun Province. The day before, word had arrived at the capital from Sougen, also headed to Bun Province. Gyousou and company had safely crossed the mountains. If that indeed was the case, then Tetsui would be several days away. In fact, several days later another messenger pigeon arrived. They had arrived at Rin'u, the prefectoral palace this side of Tetsui, and set up camp.

"He seems to have arrived safely," said Senkaku, the Minister of Earth, with a relieved smile.

Risa had ran into him in the *Romon*, the soaring gate to the south of the Imperial living quarters and the Imperial Court. It was a huge building with three towers at least ten times the height of a normal person. In the center of the white hall, sandwiched between the open north and south doors, a large, white staircase descended toward the Sea of Clouds.

"I wish all the best to His Highness," said Senkaku. "Though I fear expressing such concerns about a man who was once a general himself could be thought offensive."

"Indeed," Risai agreed with a smile, and continued down the staircase.

That was when it happened—a low, faint, subterranean rumble. Risai stopped in her tracks, wondering where the sound was coming from. Apparently deaf to it, Senkaku glanced curiously over his shoulder at her.

"What was that sound just now?" Risai said.

She remembered later that the mountain quaked. The sound arose from the earth beneath her feet—from the whole of Ryou'un Mountain supporting the Imperial Palace—shaking her body. Or so it seemed to her. The world wavered back and forth. The enormous *Romon* creaked back and forth like a bundle of sticks.

A shadow fell across her startled eyes. She tilted her head back just in time to

see the tiles peel away from roof of the Romon and cascade down like an avalanche.

At that moment, a quake had indeed shaken the mountain. Observing the Imperial Palace from the air, the observer would have seen an island floating in the Sea of Clouds. And in the center of the island, huge, round wave rising high against the cliffs that formed the bay and then spreading out concentric circles.

The surface of the Sea of Clouds rose up and crashed down on a wing of one of the palace buildings adjacent the cliffs. The building rocked and shook and collapsed with a deafening scream. As if someone had taken a giant hammer to a section of the palace.

The whirlwind kicked up by the blow turned into a squall racing out into all directions. The sun dimmed, turning into a copper shadow. A moment later, the red-tinged sky began to gather into a swirling whirlpool, like some poisonous volcanic miasma.

### *What is this?*

Risai sat down suddenly in amazement right where she was standing. What was this strange sky expanding beyond the veil of dust? Spasms coursed through the ground. The shaking had already ceased, but as if some being were stirring in the bowels of the Earth, the tremors shot up through the palms of her hands.

“A shoku—” screamed a nearby voice on the verge of hysteria.

When Risai glanced back over her shoulder, Senkaku looked up at her. He was sprawled on the cobblestones of the Romon, covered with dirt.

The thought, “*This* is a shoku,” again mingled with thought, “*Why?*” She had never encountered a shoku before. She had also heard that a shoku never occurred above the Sea of Clouds.

Senkaku picked himself up. The tile shards had rained down even to where he’d been standing. Another two or three steps and the both of them would be buried beneath them.

“Risai, the Taiho—”

Hearing the urgency in his voice, Risai sprang to her feet. The earth continued

to groan. No small number of people lay on the ground around them, moaning and screaming. She couldn't spare them any attention now.

*Where was Taiki?* It was too early for him to be attending the afternoon's session on government affairs. He should have already left the Gai-den, but he couldn't have already made it all the way back to his room in the Seishin. He must be in Jinjuu Manor.

"It's okay," Risai said. "The Daiboku should be with the Taiho—"

Senkaku grasped Risai's arm. His dirty face had turned quite green. "Risai, don't you know? Shoku simply don't occur naturally in the heavens. If a *meishoku* has occurred, then it could only have been brought about by the Taiho."

Risai broke into a sprint.

"Risai!"

"Senkaku, take care of the wounded!" she called out behind her. She leapt over the rubble and ran toward the Roshin. She knew that a kirin could cause a very small shoku called a *meishoku*. But a kirin born and raised in Yamato should not know how to bring such a shoku about.

Risai first met Taiki on Mt. Hou. When Gyousou set forth on the Shouzan, so had she. The kirin she met there couldn't transform into a unicorn. He possessed no shirei. A kirin born and raised in Yamato couldn't understand what being a kirin was all about. Those powers awakened within him must have sprung forth by necessity.

That being the case, what made them necessary?

The smell of dirt and torn, fresh wood; the ripening, rancid sun; the rust-colored sky; the writhing crimson currents in the air; the turbulent timbre of the subterranean rumblings—Risai could not help but be gripped by evil forebodings.

Something bad had happened. *Something unbelievably bad.*

The damage grew worse the closer she got to Jinjuu Manor. The gate in front of the Provincial Offices had toppled on its side. In places the walls had collapsed. Glancing through the gaps, the buildings inside were badly listing and

more had fallen over. Cobblestones had bubbled up like foam on water, flipped over and tossed around. Fissures snaked through the ground. Rubble was strewn about everywhere.

The grounds of Jinjuu Manor came into view. Most of the structure had been reduced to piles of stone.

The rumblings in the earth ceased. In their place came the shrieks and moans of people. The dim rays of the sun shone down. She looked up. The ominous red bands in the sky were fading.

People at last began to huddle together. The mustered soldiers pawed through the rubble looking for any sign of Taiki. The small kirin was nowhere to be found. There was not one trace of him on the western side of the Seiden in Jinjuu Manor or on the balcony or in the gardens facing the Sea of Clouds.

Buildings and trees had been torn up by the roots, the agitated earth and shards of tile heaped up in piles. Then the giant waves smashed down on top of them, sweeping everything into the Sea of Clouds, leaving only the scarred ground behind.

Ships were launched, kijuu saddled up, the gardens excavated—all searching for signs of the small Saiho.

But his whereabouts had not been discovered.

While the search continued, a messenger pigeon bearing news of the emergency was dispatched to Bun Province. Before that bird reached Bun Province, a pigeon from Bun Province arrived at the capital, carrying word that Gyousou had suddenly vanished.

The bedroom fell silent. Risai clung to the jewel hanging around her neck as if for dear life.

“We have heard nothing more of His Highness. Or of the Taiho.”

“Risai, if this is too hard for you—” Youko was about to call a halt to the proceedings, but Risai closed her eyes and shook her head.

“The Imperial Court was thrown into chaos. Nobody could put together an organized plan to look for His Highness and the Taiho.”

Risai gasped for breath. Youko anxiously grasped her hand. “Are you all right?”

*I'm fine,* Risai meant to reply, but her voice faded away in the middle of her labored breath. Only the sound of the wind. The sound of her ringing ears. And within the wind, the sound of Kaei's voice.

*No.*

“We'll call it a day and pick things up at this point next time. Well, then—”

Risai stretched out her arm in the direction of her voice. She stretched out her arm—and realized again that her right arm was missing. This was how much she had lost. After so long the anguish welled up inside her.

“Please help us.” Releasing the jewel clasped in her hand, she reached out. A warm hand enclosed hers. “I beg of you. Save Tai.”

“I understand.”

Risai heard the doctor in the waiting room rushing to her side. “That's enough,” she heard him say as she sank down into darkness and remorse.

# Chapter 11

[2-4] “What do you think?” Youko asked the two men following her as they left the conservatory.

The one appeared expressionless, deep in his thoughts. The other replied, “I’m not sure what to think. For the time being, at least, we now have some understanding as to what led up to the disappearance of the Imperial Tai and the Tai Taiho.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Youko said with a bit of a frown. “The woman wants us to help her save Tai. What do you think about *that*?”

Koukan raised an eyebrow. “Lady Risai seems to be requesting that concrete measures be taken on her kingdom’s behalf. But Kei can provide only so much in its present state.”

Koukan having made that point, Keiki stopped, bowed, and took his leave. He’d been called back to the provincial offices to attend to business. Koukan as well had to attend to his duties as Chousai and exited the Seishin.

*My entire retinue can’t spend all their time tending to Risai,* Youko thought as she headed to the Inner Palace. Kei was a kingdom on the mend, and she had problems enough of her own.

As Koukan said, it was easy enough to ask for help. But when reality reared its ugly head, what exactly could she do? Exactly two years had passed since her coronation. She was an inexperienced and illiterate *taika* empress, a stranger in a strange land who left most of the weightier matters of government to Koukan and Keiki. With her free time not taken up by the tasks they shouldered, she studied under the guidance of her tutors.

That was the way things stood for now. In any case, there was nothing left in the Imperial Treasury or the Imperial Court to spare for other kingdoms.

With these thoughts on her mind, Youko headed toward the west wing of the Inner Palace. She spotted a man in armor coming toward her along the colonnade.

“Oh, Kantai.”

Recognizing her, Kantai stopped and bowed. Kantai was the general of the Palace Guard.

“Just the man I was looking for,” Youko said.

Kantai took a measured step backwards. “If Your Highness is looking for a fencing partner, I must beg off. I just came from giving your retainers a real work-out. I’m afraid that any attempts to blow off a little steam at this point would lay me out flat.”

Youko smiled. “No problem. Then why not sit back and relax for a while?”

“Yes,” Kantai said with a bow, and accompanied her to the library at the heart of the Inner Palace. During the day, the library was where Youko relaxed when not conducting official business.

“This is one ragtag dynasty,” Youko said to herself as she brewed herself a cup of tea. Kantai started a bit and Youko smiled thinly. Whatever could be done to save Tai was energy and resources she should be expending on behalf of Kei.

Before mastering the business of government, she first had to learn how to read and write. That summed up the state things were in. A good half of her retainers had originally been self-styled “knights of the streets,” ignorant of both the law and the basic rules of warfare. They pretty much had to be taught everything from scratch. And there was no surplus of teachers. The responsibility had fallen directly upon the General of the Palace Guard of the Left.

“Now you’re training the junior retainers as well. I’m sorry for piling so much on your plate, Kantai.”

“Not at all. It’s all the same to me. With no wars to fight, I’ve got plenty of time on my hands.”

Youko laughed. They both knew that wasn’t the truth. When she’d first come to this world, she’d been amazed at the large scale of the armies. But once she

became apprised of the facts, she understood the reasons why. There wasn't anything like a "police force" here. Acting under the direction of the Ministry of Fall, the army conducted patrols and enforced the law. Public works also fell under the jurisdiction of the army.

Projects that did not require the conscription of civilians were directed by the government, and the work was performed by the army and chain gangs made up of criminals serving out their sentences. Charged as well with the defense of the Imperial Palace and the cities and the protection of aristocrats, there was always plenty for the army to do, even when there were no battles to fight.

"It doesn't amount to much, but consider this a small reward," said Youko, holding out a tea cup.

Kantai smiled and accepted it graciously. "Appears to be alcohol-free, but thank you anyway."

They both laughed. Youko asked him, "What do you know of the Imperial Tai? He seems quite famous in some quarters."

"Ah," said Kantai, nodding. "I'm not personally acquainted with the man. According to what I've heard, he used to be General Saku."

"How about Risai? She was originally a general of the Jou Provincial Guard."

"Unfortunately, my education doesn't reach that far. But now that you mention it, the kijuu she rode here has healed up very well."

"It has? That's good to hear."

"I don't know General Ryuu, but looking at her kijuu, I sense that she's an outstanding person. The kijuu shows a remarkable loyalty towards its master and appears to be well-trained. It's called *breaking* the animal, but naturally this involves caring for it as one would a child, being all that the word *master* implies. No creature can ever be truly *broken* otherwise."

"Agreed."

"I've never heard her name before. The name of an ordinary general is unlikely to spread beyond the borders of a kingdom. General Saku is the rare exception. I think that's what it comes down to."

"The rare exception. And all the more impressive."

"Ah," Kantai said with a knowing expression. "Comparing yourself and General Saku, eh?"

"Not that it would do me any good. He seems the far more heroic figure."

"Well, if he was such a heroic figure, Tai wouldn't be in the chaotic state it's in."

"Don't be mean. We don't know that the Imperial Tai is the cause of it. A calamity seems to have occurred. Nobody's sure of the details. It's too early to lay the consequences at his feet."

Kantai bowed his head only slightly, asking with a bit more seriousness, "And that calamity?"

"Some sort of coup d'etat. A pretender has arisen and the Imperial Tai and the Tai Taiho have gone missing. That's all we know at this point. For the rest, we'll have to wait on Risai's recovery."

"I see," said Kantai, and appeared to sink into his thoughts.

Youko did as well. She didn't know any of the details, except that Risai had come to Kei begging for help. She had risked her life to make this appeal. Alas, the scatterbrained, patchwork Imperial Court of Kei was in no condition to help her.

"In the final analysis," said Kantai, "a reputation is a thing bestowed by others."

"Hmm?" said Youko, glancing over her shoulder at him.

"It's the kind of label people attach to you after the fact, when they can look at all the results. A general who wins a commanding victory—even by accident—will be called invincible. And if he's such an invincible general, then he will be perceived in similarly hallowed terms. Just as there are those who, despite their incompetence, have fortuitously managed to keep defeat at bay."

"You're saying perhaps the Imperial Tai is too good to be true?"

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm only saying that if you saddle your colleagues with the quagmires and take the cakewalks for yourself, becoming a so-called

invincible warrior isn't so hard to accomplish. As far as soldierly renown goes, everybody loves the undefeated fighter. Once the word gets around that he's got an unbroken winning streak, the assumption that he's a superior general, a fine gentleman, and a man of great character, takes on a life of its own."

"Yeah. I suppose so."

"But a reputation only indicates the end product of a long process. Referring to General Saku—the Imperial Tai—as a man of heroic stature tells us how he stands in the court of public opinion *now*. Not how he got there. By the same token, at this point in time, having allowed Tai to fall into chaos, he does not appear so exemplary. At any rate, comparing oneself to others is a fruitless exercise. You will always end up comparing what the public *thinks* about the other with what you *know* about yourself."

"I see," Youko said with a weary smile.

"Even without making any comparison, I would call Your Highness a fine empress."

"Eh?"

Kantai said, if a bit smugly, "It's one fine empress who can claim her rightful place upon the throne without getting lost in it, and then hire on a hanjuu such as myself to boot. If I say so myself."

Youko laughed. "Tell me, Kantai. What if you were to head over to Tai and dispose of that pretender?"

"Surely you must be joking," Kantai said, waving his hand as if to bat away the suggestion.

"Surely my own Palace Guard is made of sterner stuff than that."

"That's not the problem. In the first place, Kei does not possess the resources necessary to field troops in such a manner. Mobilizing an army is a significant undertaking. A single division consists of twelve-thousand, five-hundred soldiers. And that's only counting the infantry. In terms of the entire fighting force, regimental commanders, horses, and kijuu must be factored in as well. You can begin to imagine the logistics of feeding and provisioning such a large ensemble?"

"Yes, indeed. Feeding and provisioning—" She quickly arrived at a total of thirteen-thousand. Thinking in terms of the country of her birth, at the bare minimum, one cup of rice per meal, times three meals, times thirteen-thousand came to thirty-nine thousand cups of rice *per day*. "You're right. It is more than I can imagine. In terms of hamburgers, thirty-nine thousand hamburgers a day—"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," Youko said with a smile.

"That's why the Minister of Summer in each region must provide for the logistics of the army. If chaos breaks out in a certain area, when troops are dispatched, they'll be provisioned by the quartermaster general. In another kingdom and in the midst of a rebellion to boot, the logistics get a lot more dicey. Basically, you'd have to carry everything you'd need with you. Aside from the issue of transportation, could that many supplies be put together at any one given time?"

"Doesn't seem possible for Kei."

"Even exhausting the kingdom's internal stores, not even the bare minimum of provisions could be scraped together. Not to mention that Kei does not have enough ships to transport them. How would you get them to Tai in the first place?"

"I see."

"From the start, dispatching soldiers to another kingdom isn't possible. Don't the Divine Decrees forbid one kingdom to invade another?"

"It wouldn't be an invasion. We would otherwise have no intent to occupy foreign ground."

Kantai inclined his head. "I suppose. You might have a point there."

"Besides, were that the case, then what is to become of me? I employed the Imperial Army of En to topple the pretender and make my way to Gyouten."

"That is true."

"Simply finding the Imperial Tai and Taiki by itself would be sufficient."

"And their current location?"

"Nobody has the slightest idea. What do you think? How would a search using a squadron of kijuu from the airborne cavalry work out?"

Kantai inclined his head some more. "Twenty-five pegasi would hardly make a dent. You'd need at least an air wing. With a hundred, you could attempt a systematic search."

"An entire air wing—"

Not impossible, but the ministers were unlikely to approve. At a time when Kei's internal resources were so strained, they'd wonder if she'd lost her marbles. Youko placed her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her hands and thought about it.

"Obviously an emperor occupying the throne really matters a lot," she muttered.

A firm expression came to Kantai's face. "That is entirely correct. Setting aside the question of what kind of man the Imperial Tai is, as long as he is missing, the people of Tai will be in a bad place. Moreover, the winters in Tai are harsh. If you would pardon the expression, he might be better off dead."

"Better off dead?"

"If the emperor dies, then the next sovereign will be chosen to replace him. In that case, the people can anticipate an end to their suffering. Even in the case of an incompetent emperor, Heaven will eventually wrest the throne from him. It simply becomes a matter of waiting him out. A throne unoccupied by an emperor who isn't dead could be said to be the worst of all worst case scenarios."

## Chapter 12

[2-5] Voices whispering back and forth awakened Risai. It was the dead of night.

"I'm positively famished."

"I thought so. I made tea. It's waiting for you."

"Thanks. Want to have it together?"

The frivolous nature of the conversation made Risai raise her head. The lady-in-waiting by the bed gave her a surprised look. Another young woman leaned around the doorframe and poked her head into the room.

"Oh, sorry. Did we wake you?"

Risai shook her head, no. "You didn't miss dinner on my account, did you?"

Suzu waved her hand back and forth. "Just taking the opportunity when it comes. Shoukei was good enough to bring me a midnight meal, so it's okay."

"Please go ahead and eat," Risai said. "I'm fine."

The girl called Shoukei smiled at Suzu. "Hurry up and clean your plate. I'll be waiting here."

Suzu nodded and left the room. As if taking her place, Shoukei sat down next to the bed. "I apologize for making such a racket over something so silly. My name is Shoukei. I'm a lady of the court like Suzu."

"Think nothing of it. I've been such a burden on you all. You needn't feel compelled to wait upon me hand and foot."

Shoukei smiled. "Don't worry about such things. We're so short-handed that we're unable to wait upon you as we ought to. We apologize."

"Oh, you needn't go to such lengths. The ladies of the court have comported themselves with extraordinary grace." Risai looked away. "The Imperial Kei also strikes me as a sincere and well-meaning person."

Shoukei grinned. "She is inclined to earnestness, and is honest to a fault."

"The occupants of Kinpa Palace seem awfully at ease around the Imperial Kei."

"That sort of mood is in the air, to be sure. I suppose you find the lack of solemnity around here quite appalling."

"No, I—"

"I've heard that the Imperial Tai is a splendid monarch. But nobody knows where he is at the moment. That surely weights on your mind."

"Yes," Risai nodded.

"The people of Tai must be suffering terribly. Not to mention the harshness of the Tai winter."

"Are you familiar with Tai?"

Shoukei shook her head. "But I'm originally from Hou. The winters in Hou are similarly bitter. One thing goes wrong and it drags you down the whole winter and puts your life at risk. I've heard that the winters in Tai are even worse than those in Hou."

"I suppose they are."

"The throne is currently empty in Hou as well. However, the situation there is different. The emperor who died in Hou had devastated the kingdom—" As she spoke a sad smile came to Shoukei face. "So the throne was vacated, for the good of the people, in some respects. But I've heard that the Imperial Tai was much loved by his people. Losing such a emperor—"

"Yes, losing such a emperor—"

"There was a coup d'etat? At the beginning of a dynasty, fearful of losing all they have stolen, the traitors and conspirators are likely to only surrender their ill-gotten gains kicking and screaming."

"I don't know if that applies—" Risai said to herself and Shoukei cocked her head to one side. "It's definitely the case that when a new dynasty begins, those who have taken advantage of the vacant post to impose their own tyrannical rule will feel the heat after the new emperor is enthroned. But I don't believe that this was the cause of the revolt."

"And so—?"

"I don't know," Risai answered. She knew rebellion had not been far from the minds of many officials, but she and her fellow officers had remained sufficiently vigilant. "I don't know how such a thing could have happened."

"His Highness may well prove to be an enlightened ruler," said Risai's obviously

impressed traveling companion, a close military aid from Jou Province. “The Sankou say they’ve never seen an Imperial Court organized so quickly. Everybody is full of admiration.”

“So it would seem.”

“Even though he’s reputed to be a pretty tough taskmaster, the infantry is overjoyed with the new emperor. And the people appear to hold him in high regard.”

Risai smiled and nodded. With his military background, Gyousou was bound to be popular among the troops. All the more so because the late Emperor Kyou had arisen from the civil service and held the uniformed services in low regard.

Upon assuming the throne, Gyousou took Emperor Kyou’s hoarded treasures and distributed them to the provincial warehouses to fortify them against the coming winter. That alone won the hearts of the people. Winters in Tai were harsh. When food and fuel ran low, their lives were on the line. Emperor Kyou’s spendthrift ways had emptied the local treasuries and warehouses. A cheer was raised when their stores were shipped back to them.

“It seems a brand new era is beginning,” Risai’s aide-de-camp said with a smile.

Risai shared these feelings. She heard the rejoicing of the people. Venturing into the city centers revealed that their citizens were inclined to think well of Gyousou. And it wasn’t just the commoners. The ministers bustling about the Imperial Palace wore enthusiastic expressions on their faces.

But a speeding carriage makes a lot of noise that can drown out fainter voices of alarm.

Joining the Imperial Court as a general of the Provincial Guard, Risai couldn’t help noticing the strange shadows that unexpectedly lurked here and there amidst the frenetic surroundings. It wasn’t until after the Festival of the Winter Solstice that she understood what it was she’d been observing.

“I’ll shortly be sending the Taiho to the Kingdom of Ren,” Gyousou said to his advisors. “The round trip to Ren takes about a month. During that time we shall conduct the winter hunt.”

At first Risai took the words at face value. As no important business awaited

them around the New Year, that was when they'd hold a large-scale hunting expedition. Though the affairs of the Imperial Court had pretty much been put in order, this still struck her as cavalier behavior.

From the confused air circulating through the room, she wasn't the only one who thought so. General Asen of the Palace Guard of the Right broke the silence. In a strangely low voice he asked, "And the game in this hunt?"



"Jackals."

The abruptness of the answer made Risai gulp.

"We must deal with those government officials who corrupted their offices under the cover provided by the late emperor. We cannot turn a blind eye while these beasts roam the countryside. If left alone, it is likely that, begrudging their fall from grace, they will light fires elsewhere. They are a wily bunch, and the personal fortunes they've amassed are indispensable to the future of Tai."

Risai realized to her horror that he was speaking of a political purge. The small room was filled with groans and sighs as others gave vent to similar feelings.

"Once the festival is concluded, only the New Year awaits. A diplomatic mission will be posted to Ren. With the envoys accompanied by a general who has commanded both the Palace and Zui Provincial Guards, I believe our quarries will suspect nothing. Throw a big enough net and we should snare them all."

"And during that time the Taiho will be sent abroad?" Asen asked.

Gyousou nodded. "This is not something I wish Kouri to witness."

"But isn't he bound to hear about it sooner or later?"

"I'll see to it that he does not. What is being discussed here shall not be mentioned to Kouri or to anybody else not participating directly in this campaign."

"But producing these indictments in secret? This—"

Risai raised her voice to object. She understood that the rod could not be spared when it came to dealing with these wayward officials. But summarily executing them without a public trial was akin to a lynching.

"Of course we shall follow the rule of law in its entirety, albeit not in the public eye. The government departments involved in this campaign have carefully selected and organized the prosecutors. All other officials will be kept out of the loop. Everything should be wrapped up by the time Kouri returns. He should notice a new face here and there, and a slight decrease in the total workforce."

*Aren't you lying to him?* Risai felt like asking but thought better of it.

Considering the kirin's benevolent nature, its natural abhorrence of bloodshed,

and its loathing of injustice, keeping him in the dark might well be preferable. Exposure to blood alone would make a kirin ill. These actions could certainly be read as an indication of Gyousou's compassion towards Taiki.

Even as she compelled herself to consent, another voice was heard, that of Kaei, recently appointed head of the Ministry of Fall.

"Are you sure this is an acceptable course? With all due respect, the Taiho will find out sooner or later. Rather than hiding such things behind his back, why not communicate the truth to him directly?"

"My orders stand," Gyousou answered brusquely, ensuring that his was the last word on the subject.

Listening to the details of the campaign, Risai again felt a cold chill down her back—her own frightening lack of second thoughts about bringing down these scheming courtiers in one fell swoop.

Indeed, once Emperor Kyou's favored retainer, Gyousou had installed his subordinates throughout the Imperial Court. He would already have a firm understanding of what people did and didn't do, who the problem children were and how they should be disciplined.

Since assuming the throne, Gyousou would have already drawn up his plans, who should be removed and who should be replaced. He had undoubtedly foreseen what might happen when those "jackals" were brought to heel. In fact, this "winter hunt" was aimed not only at corrupt officials, but was part of an ongoing strategy to flush the hidden quail and wipe the slate clean.

Observing the purge unfold, those with treachery and evil buried in their hearts, those who had ingeniously hidden their evil acts from view, would feel the heat and panic and scamper from their holes.

*This man— Risai thought, looking at Gyousou. This man will pull off in a year what would take any other emperor a decade—even half a century—to accomplish.*

The chill ran through her. Up to that point, she hadn't harbored any doubts about Gyousou. A general of great renown, Risai as well admired his disposition and temperament, and respected him enormously.

But for the first time she felt the whisperings of an ill omen in the air.

Even if convinced that these feelings arose solely in reaction to the substance of Gyousou's campaign, she did not question his might or authority as emperor for a second. She simply couldn't help wondering why such dark shadows would descend on her amidst such brilliant splendor.

A short time after that, Kaei suddenly showed up at her residence. It was night and a light snow was falling.

# Chapter 13

[2-6] Kaei bowed and said, “It looks like snow.”

Risai escorted her to the parlor of her residence. “Yes, it certainly has gotten cold.” She showed Kaei to a chair by the brazier. “I’m honored that you came all the way here despite the inclement weather.”

“Oh, it was nothing.” Kaei shook her head. “I’m the one who should apologize for visiting on such short notice. There was something that I wished to discuss with you. I came to this decision on the spur of the moment and impertinently dispatched a note to that effect, so I’m pleased that you agreed.”

“Oh, it’s my privilege,” Risai said with a smile.

She offered food and drink, but Kaei seemed lost in her thoughts. A discouraged expression occupied her pale face. On top of that, she looked chilled to the bone.

Kaei appeared in her mid-forties. In terms of her bearing and actual age, she was Risai’s senior. Nevertheless, the Kaei who sat before her now looked like a lost child. This did not strike her as a visit made in the name of neighborliness.

“Please excuse me for asking, but what is the purpose of your visit?”

As if awakened from her reverie, Kaei looked at Risai. “Ah, no, I did not have a particular task in mind. I simply wished to talk things over with you.”

So she said, except that for the past few minutes she’d pretty much remained mum. Perhaps realizing this herself, Kaei began with a chagrined nod of her head. “Nothing that would excuse taking up your time and barging in on you like this.”

Risai tilted her head to the side. “Please don’t think me too forward for asking, but has something been troubling you, Lady Kaei?”

Kaei raised her head sharply, almost as if Risai had struck her in the chest. An expression of emotional distress—on the verge of tears—contorted her face.

"Please forgive me if I said anything to upset you. I'm afraid my manners are less refined than they should be."

"Not at all," said Kaei, shaking her head. "After all, I am the one imposing on you. To tell the truth, I thought long and hard about what I should say to a person with whom I have barely spoken and then suddenly decided to visit. Your getting right to the point is an enormous relief."

A slight smile came to her face. She ran her fingers along the rim of the wine glass with an air of uncertainty. Unlike a military officer such as Risai, her polished, manicured nails slipped along the edge of the coarse porcelain. And perhaps trembled slightly.

"Are you cold? I could have more wood added to the fire."

"No, I'm not cold—" She apparently took note of her trembling fingers and hastily clasped the one hand in the other. "I'm not cold. Rather, Lady Risai, I am frightened."

"Frightened?"

Kaei nodded and looked straight at Risai. She appeared to Risai to be scared out of her wits.

"With the coronation of His Highness, the Imperial Palace has become a whirlwind of activity. I really wonder what manner of monarch this is. Never before have I heard of an Imperial Court being reordered at such a pace."

Risai didn't venture to agree with her, but waited for her to come to her point. These were the words whispered all about the Imperial Court. But from the slight quaver in her voice, it was clear that Kaei did not perceive this as reason to rejoice.

Kaei all but blurted out, "Is it really best for him to advance his agenda so quickly?"

"Quickly?"

"It is always necessary to reform and reorganize the Imperial Court. And to

banish the criminal and the corrupt. But must the process be accelerated like this? Why can he not proceed more slowly, take the time to scrutinize the landscape and verify the results, and let change permeate in a less hasty manner?"

"You think him impatient?"

"I cannot help feeling anxious. I mean no criticism of His Highness. Far from it. But as for myself, what I find myself doing terrifies me. I cannot shake the feeling that something important has slipped our minds, that we are forgetting something we cannot afford to. Whether *everything* can be transformed with such zeal is a question that will not leave my mind."

Risai nodded. She didn't think such concerns unreasonable in the least.

Kaei had originally been the minister-in-chief of Ran Province, reputed to be wise and thoughtful. The few times they'd chanced to meet had left Risai with the impression that she was a compassionate person with a deep respect for civility, prudent in character, and with an attentive nature.

That Gyousou had selected her as one of the six ministers of the Rikkan was only common sense. And yet the question had also reached Risai's ears: *But as the Daishikou?* The Ministry of Fall was responsible for consolidating and enforcing the civil and criminal statutes, and for maintaining public order. At the same time, the Ministry of Fall handled foreign diplomacy.

But doubts were also whispered about that her emotional nature was not a good fit with the mission of the Ministry of Fall.

The Ministry of Fall was a cold, heartless ministry that required the levying of sanctions and punishments, and the issuing of commands and decrees with absolute impartiality. It was said that weeds withered in the face of the freezing frost of Fall and wilted beneath the fierce rays of Summer.

To be sure, Risai felt nothing of a Daishikou's ironfisted intensity from the woman sitting in front of her, who looked as fragile as a lost child.

"I'd always been in charge of the Ministry of Education. I came here to do my best for the welfare of the people. I have not accustomed myself to judging and sentencing them. I know it's not simply a problem of getting used to a new role.

If it was only my job, I could carry it out well enough. But I cannot help believing that I could not have been appointed to the Ministry by anybody aware of how unfit I was for the position.”

*And yet—* she murmured to herself. She lowered her eyes. Once again her trembling fingers traced the rim of the glass. “After this, I shall have to judge a great many government officials. And I must do so in short order and without second thoughts. This frightens me. Even in the case of a criminal, can such expeditious action ever be good?”

Risai smiled. “Please. Drink your wine. Warm yourself.” She looked on attentively as Kaei nodded and raised the cup to her lips.

“Lady Kaei,” Risai continued, “I think it is perfectly natural to harbor such apprehensions. To be sure, the Imperial Court is changing at a pace that would make anyone’s eyes spin. The pursuit of wrongdoers is an indispensable part of the new Imperial Court, but I can’t think of another example where such a fight could be concluded with a single blow. I think His Highness is a remarkable individual with a surprisingly strong will.”

Risai flashed a wry smile and Kaei responded with a grin of her own.

“We soldiers believe in taking advantage when the opportunity presents itself. When the day of decision arrives, we must seize the day. At such moments, we carry the cause forward without hesitation. That is the way soldiers think. During a war, there may be no time for careful deliberation. Linger too long musing over a matter and the chance of a lifetime may slip away. That is why I understand the decisions His Highness is making. We are at a critical moment in time and we must act.”

With that, Risai smiled. “But asked whether I could be so determined, I do indeed have my doubts. Life is confusing enough by its own nature. Dragging things out makes nothing if not a lot of mud. That is a failing of people like myself.”

“Do you not feel a great sense of anxiety, Lady Risai?”

Risai hesitated a bit answering, but thought it better to answer before Kaei caught on to any self-doubts. “I can’t say there is anything I am *anxious* about. I’m almost speechless with wonder at the sheer determination that has brought

us to this juncture. But without a doubt, I have faith in His Highness's unflinching decisiveness. This conviction alone convinces me that purging the corrupt element in one fell swoop is the correct course of action. The faster the Imperial Court is put in order, the faster we can do right by the people."

"Yes, I do understand that," Kaei said with a nod. "However, that sense of conviction—I cannot yet see myself coming into possession of that degree of unwavering belief. By which I absolutely do not mean to imply any lack of faith in His Highness—"

"Lady Kaei, had you and His Highness ever rubbed shoulder before now?"

"No. There had been no personal connection between us in any way. Only the same stories and rumors that everybody else heard." She smiled to herself. "That is why I was so surprised when I accepted the appointment to the Ministry of Fall. I couldn't believe that he even knew I existed!"

"That is the kind of man he is."

"Lady Risai, had you previously been a retainer of his?"

Risai had met Gyousou on Mt. Hou. She had also gone on the Shouzan. That was when she first met the legendary General Saku. Those who entered the Yellow Sea to go on the Shouzan formed ad hoc groups and journeyed across the Yellow Sea as more-or-less organized units.

Gyousou did not join any of the groups. He entered the Yellow Sea accompanied by his own men, and set off for Mt. Hou in his own unique manner.

"So I didn't set eyes upon him until we had arrived at Mt. Hou."

"I see. Isn't separating yourself from the other parties and forging on alone a dangerous course of action?"

"Under normal circumstances, yes, it is quite dangerous. But not to His Highness, wouldn't you say? I subsequently heard that back in the reign of Emperor Kyou, for at least three years, Gyousou withdrew his name from the Registry of Wizards and took a sabbatical from the Palace Guard. During that time he entered the Yellow Sea. There are hunters who make a living capturing kijuu in the Yellow Sea, and he apprenticed himself to one of them."

Kaei's eyes widened with surprise. "A general of the Palace Guard became an apprentice?"

Risai grinned. "That is the kind of man he is. Come what may, he was going to capture and tame a kijuu of his own. It was said that he didn't join any of the groups during the Shouzan because he also wanted to go hunting. When I heard that Gyousou had entered the Yellow Sea at the same time as the rest of us, I knew that I was destined to be at best a bystander on the journey."

Risai smiled sadly. Kaei pressed her lips together. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

"Not at all. I was never his retainer. However, I was able to share some wonderful moments with Gyousou-sama and the Taiho at Mr. Hou. That connection must have been what led him to give me a second look."

A general of the Palace Guard and a general of the Provincial Guard—there was a great difference in status between them, but the latter was not a subordinate of the former. So they related to each other as colleagues.

Soon after his enthronement, Gyousou summoned her to Kouki and introduced her to his retainers. Many of them had made the Shouzan with her and so were familiar faces. After her appointment as general of the Sui Provincial Guard, she found it quite natural to associate with the emperor's retainers.

"Telling you about this now, I am left with a curious feeling, uncertain myself as to whether or not I am acting as a retainer of His Highness."

"Is that so—" said Kaei with a slight sigh. "The thing is, I find it hard to dismiss what my own instincts are telling me as well. Or rather, you do not strike me, Lady Risai, as a retainer or subordinate. That you chose to follow His Highness from the start, before being compelled to, sets you somewhat apart."

"You really think so?"

"Yes. That is why I sought you out. Others would quail from voicing their misgivings. I sensed that if I told them about my fears, they would reject those feelings on the spot. You impressed me as someone a bit different than the rest. Perhaps because you are a woman like me."

"I'm pleased that you think so," Risai replied.

Kaei's misgivings were not at all unreasonable. Gyousou's retainers had served in his shadow for a long time. They understood his temperament and the way he thought. Deep bonds of trust had been forged between them. Those bonds were so strong that at times she felt like an outsider. And if this was true of Risai, it would be all the more so for Kaei. It was only natural for Kaei to believe that she was a stranger in a strange land, gripped by feelings of isolation and alienation.

"My sense of apprehension may well arise out of loneliness and insecurity," Kaei admitted with a self-effacing smile. "When His Highness opines on some matter, everybody, starting with yourself, Lady Risai, seems to catch on at once, as if inferring his meaning and intent from a single word. That is what it seems like to me. I'm the only one who fails to grasp the big picture that he is drawing for the rest of you. Everybody else has taken in the information in big draughts, distilled its essence, and forged on ahead while I'm still checking out my surroundings, half scared to death. I feel like a lost child left at the side of the road."

"I don't think we all automatically grasp every point His Highness wishes to make."

"Do you really think that's the case?"

"Most likely. There is plenty about the way His Highness approaches things that I don't understand. But if that is the tack that he chooses to take, then I'll consider it good enough for me for the time being."

"So you are able to trust his word and follow." There was a touch of sadness in Kaei's voice, accompanied by the echoes of faint misgivings.

"Not that exactly. I don't mean to suggest that I trust unconditionally. I'm afraid I'm not making myself clear, but His Highness and I are different."

"Different?"

"The first time we met, I thought to myself: *This is what it means to be cut from a different bolt of cloth.* I mean, we simply looked at the world with different eyes. His is a view of the world that people like myself can't really comprehend."

Kaei sunk into her thought for a minute. Then suddenly lifted her head as if

struck by a thought. “I knew that the reign of Emperor Kyou would not be a long one. And yet I still could not push my thoughts beyond the world I saw right in front of me. Similar to that, you mean?”

“Yes, like that. I hate to admit it, but I found myself in the same boat. I knew that Emperor Kyou would not rule for a great many years. Tai would fall into chaos. Outlaws and brigands would push the kingdom into chaos. I could see that far into the future. But my mind wouldn’t reach beyond that point. I didn’t even feel the necessity of thinking beyond that point. And worse, I couldn’t grasp the necessity of thinking about it right there and then.”

“I understand.”

“Observing His Highness in action, I think to myself: *Yes, that’s it.* The ship of state was listing badly and taking on water. That being the case, then the human resources should be mustered to man the pumps. Cultivating that kind of manpower and installing where it is needed takes time. I have realized that, mourning your kingdom’s fallen state, you must prepare to raise it up. But at the time those thoughts never entered my mind. Such lassitude amazes me even now. I could hear the bells tolling, but could not imagine that they would ever toll for me.”

Kaei nodded. “But it was apparent to His Highness.”

“That is what I believe. That’s the difference between us. My mind couldn’t reach that far. My thinking was insufficient. But I’m not saying what I really mean. I would like to believe that, given the opportunity, I would have come to the same conclusions. However, it was an opportunity I simply wasn’t prepared to seize.”

Risai nodded to herself and continued. “That’s what I try to remember when I cannot see for myself the objective His Highness is aiming at. I trust that His Highness can see that which I cannot. If I sensed clear doubts or obvious faults, I would object as well. But I don’t have those doubts or sense those faults. That’s what comes to mind at those times when I lack understanding. That’s what allows me to condone his actions. And when I see the results, I’m confident everything will become clearer and I’ll see the end from the beginning.”

“I see,” Kaei said with no great certainty, again looking at Risai with anxiety in

her eyes. "But do you think the Taiho agrees as well?"

*Now she is cutting close to the bone. "That's—"*

"I only know that if and when word of the forthcoming troubles reaches the ears of the Taiho, it will wound him deeply. Isn't proceeding anyway and sending the Taiho off to a foreign kingdom nothing more than a strong-arm tactic? What if the Taiho knew that a purge would be underway while he was abroad? It's not just the existence of a purge that would cause him pain. Will not the fact that he could do nothing, that he could make no appeals for compassion or clemency, leave the deepest scars?"

Risai fell into silence. Thinking about this from Taiki's point of view, the feeling came to her that he would blame himself for failing to do anything. And at the same time, if he realized that he was being sent abroad to keep him from doing anything, that would hurt him all the more.

"While I do not deign to read the Taiho's mind, I can see how His Highness might appear to be taking the Taiho for granted. I can't help thinking that this is true of all the decisions he has made thus far."

"Lady Kaei."

Kaei smiled ruefully. "Well, it looks as if all I did was complain. That's the way I see things. His Highness will take only those of his retainers who trust him unquestioning and push through his reforms at top speed. The same way the feelings of the Taiho will be set aside, so will many other things as well. Or so it seems to me."

*What other things will be set aside?* Risai meant to ask, but she got the feeling Kaei was not up to answering that question.

Perhaps Kaei was perturbed only by the rapid pace of change going on. This didn't mean she could provide physical evidence to support her feelings. Her anxieties about Gyousou were really her sense of panic at riding the whitewater that he had created. Many people felt the same way. Nobody liked rapid change. No, far from it. There were plenty of people who embraced their fears instinctively. And people who quailed at Gyousou's resolve and lack of indecision. And people who opposed him merely for the sake of opposition.

Squeaky wheels in search of grease.

Opposition under normal circumstances was related to dissatisfaction with the way a person was being treated by the government, misgivings about the competence of the ministers, or was born out of some disagreement with the emperor's temperament.

Yet Kaei expressing concerns about the way she was being treated didn't mean she questioned Gyousou's competence. Her complaints sounded more to Risai like a disagreement with Gyousou's personality, but that was probably not the whole of it. The root of the problem lay in Kaei's irrational fear of rapid change.

A brilliant light shining in the darkness cast the darkest shadows. That wasn't Gyousou's fault, and nobody was criticizing him directly. If so, these problems would be easy to understand. Easy to read and address in advance.

Risai didn't know where and in what form such sentiments were lurking. as Risai bid Kaei goodbye, it occurred to her that this opaqueness was what she found frightening.

# Chapter 14

[2-7] Risai and Kaei grew closer after that. Risai wasn't as much of a newcomer as Kaei, and technically wasn't one of Gyousou's retainers. They were both women, but the one was a civil official and the other a military officer. Perhaps being as different as they were alike explained why they got on so well together.

Kaei wore a worried expression on her face as she always did. Taiki was on his way to Ren and the winter hunt had begun in earnest, leaving her all the more depressed. She felt herself engulfed in uncertainty.

Government officials of all stripes were being dragged to the gallows to answer for their sins. It was up to Kaei to assess the charges and hand down the verdicts. Already the bureaucrats were saying she was too soft, her sentences too light. Even when she hardened her heart, from the shadows they called her a pushover.

Knowing nothing about the accused or their circumstances didn't stop her critics from assailing the ministry. Would the actions of these corrupt officials, who had done as they pleased while serving the previous emperor, be all but ignored? Be allowed let run free without reproof? The bitter aspersions rained down.

The assaults ate away at her mentally and physically.

"Why am I in charge of the Ministry of Fall? Risai, I can't comprehend what His Highness could have been thinking." Kaei sat in her office at the Ministry and wept. The daily grind of her job had all but made it her second home.

At a loss for consoling words, Risai left for the Outer Palace. It was night. The world above the Sea of Clouds should be warmer than the world below, but the gardens at night were cold enough that frost had started to fall. A gentle breeze was blowing. Risai almost thought she could smell blood in the air, when there should be no reason for such an odor to linger about the Imperial Palace.

Civil servants were arrested and handed over to the Ministry of Fall, and then hauled off to the gallows. Depending on the circumstances, Risai and her colleagues had the responsibility of surreptitiously disposing of the bodies. Because of the necessity of acting in a covert fashion, Risai employed only a bare minimum number of subordinates. She ended up having to dirty her hands as well. She'd been reduced to grave digger on occasion, and was sure the stench was seeping into her skin.

But that was something she could live with. As a soldier, she'd become inured to death. But Kaei—

For some reason or other, Risai found herself in the Inner Palace. Spotting the gate leading to the Seishin, she stopped in her tracks. The six generals of the Imperial Army had permission from Gyousou to enter the Seishin whenever they wished. But what would she say to him once they were face to face? She had no idea. Finally she turned and left with a heavy heart.

She sat down in a corner of a gazebo within the Inner Palace gardens, too tired to go any further. *Kaei really is in a bad way.* Risai hunched her shoulders and sighed.

From behind her a voice said, "You look worn out."

She instinctively straightened her posture. Glancing over her shoulder, it was indeed Gyousou who had addressed her.

"Well, that's not really the problem."

"Mind if I sit down?"

Risai wordlessly nodded.

Gyousou asked, "Aren't you cold?"

"It is on the cool side." Her spirits were like shards of ice. Compared to how she felt inside, the frost falling on the stone tables hardly touched her at all.

"You've gotten to know Kaei quite well?"

That comment was enough to make Risai want to jump to her feet and run away. He likely had a host of reprimands he wanted delivered to Kaei. But right now Risai didn't want to hear them.

"The word is you're quite good friends."

"Y-yes."

"There's something I'd like you to ask her on my behalf: whether she'd consider taking a sabbatical."

Risai's eyes widened with surprise. "Are you talking about dismissing Kaei?"

She fixed her eyes on him and Gyousou smiled wryly. "Nothing like that. I don't mean to suggest any dissatisfaction with the job she is doing, but she seems to be shouldering a great burden."

"I don't think Kaei would consider it a *burden*. She would consider it her job."

What he was talking about—dismissing Kaei as Daishikou—meant ousting her from of the Imperial Court. Such a demotion would be unbearable for any civil servant. And so Risai rose to her defense.

"She's working as hard as she can. She's being criticized from every quarter. Though perhaps Kaei was never a good fit with the Ministry of Fall from the start."

"Perhaps," Gyousou agreed.

Risai trembled though it wasn't from the cold. It was her anger. "If you understood that much, Your Highness, then why appoint her to the ministry in the first place?"

"You mean, the Daishikou is soft on the criminal element—"

"Yes, indeed. Which is why I said she's not the right person for this job."

"Which is why she *is* the right person for the job."

His answer left her at loss for words.

"As someone who is 'soft on the criminal element,' Kaei serves as a counterweight to madness swirling around us. But from her perspective, there must be limits to what she can endure. If things get too hard for her to bear, I would happily transfer her to another position. Say, the Ministry of Spring or Earth. Let her known that an arrangement of one sort or another can be made."

*But—* Risai thought.

It seemed that Gyousou himself understood that his revolution was careening down too steep a hill.

"The judging and sentencing of people is not a thing easily controlled. Like a stone rolling down a hill, it only picks up momentum. For the time being, the stone must be allowed to roll. That is why I consider the one minister least suited for the position to be so well suited for it."

"Yes, I see that."

"But it's taking its toll on Kaei. I do not wish to see a capable and promising minister broken by such a weight. If I recommended that she take a furlough to her directly, Kaei would take it as a demotion. But if you were to broach the subject as a friend, I believe she would take such a recommendation in the spirit intended."

Risai at once felt a great weight lifting from her shoulders. She drew a deep breath and let it out. "Would it not be possible for you to proceed at even a slightly more restrained pace? Kaei is not a soldier. She feels it is her duty to put everything in context and move forward at a measured pace. I think doing so would take some of the pressure off."

"Except that our goals must be accomplished by the time Kouri returns. I've been informed that Kouri has left Ren. That leaves us no more than a fortnight to work with."

"Can this only be accomplished in the Taiho's absence?"

"I believe so."

"But after he returns to Tai, he's going to hear things. What has been going on—beyond the mere reality of the purge—cannot be repressed. And when he does find out, will it not cut him to the core? Wouldn't it be better to inform him before that happens?"

"The kirin," Gyousou noted with a thin smile, "is called the embodiment of the will of the people. That which must be hidden from the people should also be hidden from the kirin."

"You really think so? Or rather, is this the sort of thing you'd rather not have the Taiho see or hear about? And how can this be hidden from the eyes of the

people? If the reality of the purge came to light, they would certainly be alarmed. But those who conspired to cause so much pain during the reign of Emperor Kyou must be brought to justice. They want to know if their oppressors are being punished and what the Ministry of Fall is doing about it. If these cries of dissatisfaction cannot be answered, they will not be satisfied that the past has been dealt with."

A dynasty came to an end the moment that the emperor died. But that didn't bring an end to the suffering of the people. For them, there was no bright line that marked the end of one dynasty and the beginning of the next. A failing dynasty increased their suffering, exacerbated by the new Imperial Court overlooking the sins of the old bureaucrats.

Even with the enthronement of the new emperor, the early days were bound to be filled with chaos. The suffering of the people didn't end with the coronation. There needed to be some sign that marked the end of the evil era, something to shift the focus from the old regime. Something that brought both sides together as one and said that the suffering of the people was over and a new era was dawning in which all things would be made anew.

"That may well be the case."

"But—"

"But I do not wish Kouri to see any of this. He is still small and cannot abide the sight of blood. He is a kirin, after all."

"If you were really concerned about the feelings of the Taiho, shouldn't you be considering his feelings when he finds out what has been going on in his absence? When he finds out after the fact—when he cannot change anything—that he was sent out of the kingdom to ensure that he could not change anything, how will he feel then?"

It occurred to Risai that she was forgetting her place and saying more than she should, but Gyousou nodded. "It is regrettable. However, those are things I cannot do."

Risai inclined her head.

"At times, Kouri shows me a frightened countenance. To me, I am seeing in

that countenance the anxieties of the people.”

Startled, Risai looked at Gyousou.

“The Kirin is the embodiment of the people’s will—I sometimes wonder if this is not what I am seeing. A fear of warfare and the shedding of blood—isn’t that in the nature of the people as well? The late emperor arose from the civil service. As a consequence, his last days did not end in atrocities. Instead, the realm died a death of long decay. Raising up an emperor from the ranks of the military is the most effect way of rekindling the faith of the people. But at the same time it hardly calm their fears. While a military emperor is resolute, his fall from the Way is all the more calamitous. That is the fear I believe I see reflected in Kouri’s eyes.”

*This person—* Risai thought, and then forgot the rest of what she wanted to say. She didn’t know how to express what she felt right then. Something extraordinary. Something far from the commonplace. She had to wonder if he looked at that endearing child with those same eyes.

“This time around, it’s not something I want Kouri to see. And that being the case, it must be kept from the eyes of the people as well. Kouri exists to take the measure of such things. The trust of the people has not yet reached that stage —”

Yes, Risai nodded. At the same time she couldn’t help feeling, *Gyousou is not one of us*. Taiki appeared to her as little more than a young child. And once he’d exercised the enormous responsibility of selecting the emperor—a helpless, powerless child. But that was not how Gyousou saw him. Taiki continued to have a grave and important role to play, and not as his adorable lap dog. But of course that was the way things were. For Taiki was not a child but a kirin. No matter how many times this had been explained to her, this was the first time she understood it in her bones.

“As far as these events are concerned, Kouri shall be kept in the dark. And so shall the people. Acting with all due speed, and hugging the shadows as much as possible, the knowledge of what happened here will be kept from him.”

“I understand.”

Risai bowed. Gyousou nodded and got to his feet. Risai watched him leave and

then went back to Kaei. For completely different reasons than before, Kaei broke down and wept. She finally seemed to let down her guard. After crying for a while, Kaei smiled like a summer sky clearing after a thunderstorm.

"Risai, I understand now what you mean when you say that His Highness is a different kind of person than ourselves. I sense that even I can find a way to agree."

"I feel my faith confirmed as well," Risai agreed with a self-effacing smile.

Kaei appeared to take things a bit easier after that. The differences in temperament between Kaei and Gyousou's retainers seemed to balance out, and she came to be viewed as part of Gyousou's retinue.

Since that time, Risai caught sight here and there of similar changes. She began hearing questioning voices in public about the same time that Kaei had voiced her concerns—from those like Kaei who were not accustomed to Gyousou's methods, in whom rapid change produce great anxiety. There were more of them than Risai had imagined.

However, the volume of those voices diminished. Little by little, the Imperial Court became one in purpose. Or that's how it looked to her.

And Risai found this frightening. She couldn't put her concerns into words. If forced to speak her feelings aloud, she might say she was worried that something succeeding so well could just as well succeed to bad ends. The force applied could push just as hard in one direction as its exact opposite. An unforgiving emperor opened himself up to calamities, so it was said. Was not Gyousou also opening the gate to disaster?

In any case, the Imperial Court found its footing and showed a unified front. Misgivings about Gyousou's military rule, anxieties about the speed of his reforms, and fears about the resoluteness of his actions seemed to fade away. The problematic bureaucrats and ministers were dealt with before Taiki returned.

With the scouring away of this great evil, they all believed things would now start to move forward. They kept their eyes peeled, making preparation and looking for signs of forward movement. Differences in temperament, and the discord among those who called themselves retainers and those who did not,

resolved themselves as well.

There should be no problems after this. Nevertheless, Risai felt that she hadn't caught something—hadn't seen something—she should have. Some other seed of destruction was hidden in the unlit depths at the bottom of the well.

She couldn't shake the feeling. And, in fact, they were about to spring forth from beneath the placid waves.

## Interlude

### Chapter 15

[2-8] It took a while for Taiki to grasp exactly what had happened to him.

Put in plain terms, he'd been "spirited away." Scolded by his grandmother and sent out to the yard, he'd suddenly disappeared from the spot where he was standing.

He couldn't remember the moment he disappeared. As if dozing off to sleep, after a vague interval in vacant space, he'd returned to his home. More than a year had passed in the interval, but he did not sense the passing of time.

It was impossible for him to explain the substance of that which did not exist.

The police and a doctor were called. He was subsequently bounced back and forth among a number of child psychologists. The adults seemed determined to unearth that lost time, but he couldn't remember a thing.

As far as he was concerned, no break had occurred. Between the snowy courtyard and the front walk of his house on the day of his grandmother's funeral, a nebulous sense of passage had taken place, but the two events seemed to him like two beads on the same string.

The changes had happened to the world, not to him. His grandmother had died. His brother was suddenly bigger and was in his same class at school, instead of a being year behind. The kids who had been his classmates were a year ahead.

Nobody else noticed this shift in the universe. He was the one out of step.

Thus a very definite gap was born between himself and everybody else. Something very basic had given rise to discrepancies keeping them out of sync with each other.

Of course they would have no idea, but—quite unbeknownst to himself as well—he began losing *himself*. For every day he spent here, another day *there* was swept away. Not only that, but he was not conscious that the “beast” imprinted on his soul—that defined who he was—was being harmed day by day.

The shoku and the pressing demands of recuperation had used up his life force. And there was yet more healing that his body required. After many months and years had passed, his horn might lose the ability to recover, even in the proper environment.

“What’s the matter?” his father asked. “You’re not hungry?”

His father watched as his son’s chopsticks stopped moving. Sitting at the table, his son stared at the dinner meal in bewilderment. As if to intervene on his behalf, his mother patted him on the head and said, “Now that you mention it, he never liked meat. I forgot. I’m sorry about that.”

“You should stop pampering him,” his father said coldly. “Your mother prepared the food that she believes is best for you. There are little children like you starving in Africa, don’t you know. Being a picky eater makes it twice as bad. You need to eat a balanced diet.”

“So much has happened to you. You must be exhausted.” His mother put her arms around his shoulders and earnestly tried to bury their differences. “That fatty food is really spicy. It’s okay. You can just leave it on the plate.”

“No, it’s not,” his father said in an even sterner voice. “You can’t go around treating him like he’s special. He’s going to have plenty more than food on his plate to deal with. He won’t be able to count on people feeling sorry for him. After this, we’re going to be hearing all kinds of gossip from all quarters. Better to toughen him up before it’s too late.”

“But—” his mother started to say.

His father ignored her and turned his attention on his son. “You understand?”

“Y-yes. I’m sorry.” He nodded and picked up the chopsticks and soldiered on with the meal.

Of course, he had no idea that doing so held back his recovery all the more.

Sanshi's shoulders jerked in the midst of her slumber. Still half asleep, she lifted her head slightly. Engulfed by the golden darkness, the faint smell of blood trailed past her.

*What is this?* she puzzled in a partially-aware corner of her consciousness. This unpleasant trace of the foreign. This *something* that called forth feelings of unease. Sanshi momentarily lifted her head, trying to look beyond the hard shell, but gave up in frustration.

*I guess it was nothing.*

It may have only been her imagination. She was worrying too much. A big emergency was unlikely to come at them out of nowhere. Or so she tried to convince herself.

Sanshi understood that, in moment of crisis, Taiki had instinctually triggered a shoku. Fleeing his attacker, he had called down a shoku and made his escape. He passed through the gate, and at the other end of the gate was this alien world. The same alien world Taiki had been swept away to when he was inside the golden fruit.

Confronted by an unexpected and lethal threat, his subconscious had, *in extremis*, made the correct decision. Taiki fled that world to a distant place populated by people he knew. The mother whose womb he had once "borrowed" and her husband. And their children. Among what might be called his "substitute" parents and his "substitute" siblings, he was certainly beyond the reach of his assailants. Taiki had selected the place where his safety would be assured.

Which is why she should expected nothing bad to happen here.

Taiki's enemies would doubtlessly pursue him. Yet having lost him before while he was in his shell, Sanshi knew to the core of her being how difficult finding him would be. Even divining his location would take time. If Sanshi could concern herself only about an external attack, then they should be fine.

She dropped back off to sleep, telling herself that everything was okay. After an indefinite amount of time had passed, she was again awaked by a strange sensation. This happened repeatedly, to the extent that Sanshi was incapable of ignoring these unpleasant attacks on her senses.

*What is going on?* she asked herself, raising her head. She roamed about the saffron dusk, trying to ferret out the source of the unpleasantness.

"It's poison—" came Gouran's voice from somewhere in the darkness.

Sanshi finally grasped this as well. This was not poison, but he was being served food so contaminated as to resemble poison.

"Why?" she asked herself. It couldn't be his substitute parents, could it? Taiki chose to come here because here he was safe. But they seemed to be harming him further. If it could not be made to stop—Sanshi broke her self-imposed prohibition and was about to try and jump out of the shell—

Echoing from places unknown, a voice checked her actions. "Are you saying he is being held against his will? That they are his jailers?"

Gouran's words struck Sanshi as one possible explanation. "It doesn't seem possible. How could have our enemies have foreseen all this?"

Knowing that Taiki would flee here, had they somehow won over his substitute parents? Was such a thing even possible?

"Still, I don't get the feeling that he is being harmed to an extreme degree."

"But he is being served contaminated food."

"I sense no enemies about. Perhaps they are simply intimidated by Taiki's power and are trying to keep him in check."

That did seem likely, Gouran conceded from the depths of the darkness. "If so, as long as they are gentle jailers, his life should not be in danger."

"If he resists, they might hand him over to his enemies."

*Perhaps,* Gouran muttered.

Sanshi was at a loss. Should they continue on in this captive state, or try to overwhelm his jailors and free Taiki? But doing so would greatly weaken Taiki's life-force. And besides that, he did not have his horn and the inflowing psychic streams were very thin. It was probably best to hold out here, conserve their energy, and prepare for an eventual attack.

Even if they slipped away from their jailers, Taiki had no place to run to, and

Sanshi hadn't the slightest idea where a hiding place might be found. They couldn't return to Tai in its dangerous state. The only sure refuge in the world was at its center, on Mt. Hourai. But neither Taiki nor Sanshi and Gouran were capable of triggering another shoku.

Even if they could, the effort would eat away at Taiki's fleeting life-force. Beyond their ability to return was the lack of a destination to return to. If attacked a second or third time while searching for sanctuary, Sanshi did not know if they could endure. And if they did endure, their life-force exhausted, it was inevitable that they would do damage to Taiki's body.

As long as Taiki was being held prisoner "compassionately," things might conclude without a further assault. If the poison was not enough to kill him, perhaps they should let it pass.

"Taiki still requires protection in this world," came Gouran's voice, as if from far away. "Something other than the guards and walls of a prison. You saw all that commotion the other day."

Sanshi nodded. The people surrounded Taiki and bore down on him mentally and physically. In the name of "investigation," they turned the screws on him with suspicious-looking instruments. As long as he was kept away from the people called "police" or "doctors," he could probably bear being kept captive. Even so, something other than this sort of asylum would be preferable.

"Let's persevere as best we can, as long as the enemy doesn't make a move."

*Rest, but be on your guard.* His furtive voice died away, and she sensed Gouran drifting off to sleep.



## Part Three

### Chapter 16

[3-1] That day, following her morning meeting with the privy council, Youko returned to the Inner Palace to find a bird waiting for her in her living quarters. The bird was a *Ran*, used to communicate messages among the ministers.

Messenger pigeons bore letters back and forth, but a Ran memorized human speech and communicated it verbally. Like the Hou'ou (phoenix) and Hakuchi, the Ran resided in Godou Palace and could be used only by the empress and the person she was communicating with.

In other words, the Ran was the equivalent of a personal letter from the empress. The kingdom that a Ran came from could be identified by the color of its tail feathers.

Youko was a tad surprised by the sight of the Ran. She gave it a grain of silver. In a cheerful male voice, the bird said to open the Forbidden Gate at noon. And then closed its beak.

Grinning, Youko went down to the Forbidden Gate exactly at noon and waited in front of the gate. The two suugu arrived right on schedule.

"Thank you for coming so far to see me on so short a notice," she said, greeting the two with an amused smile as they dismounted.

The taller of the two men raised an eyebrow. "You asked to let you know if I knew anything regarding the matter, and that sounded like there was a job waiting for me in Kei."

"Not even the Chousai imagined that Shouryuu, the Imperial En, would be delivering the report in person. Thanks to you, the welcoming committee is running around all in a tizzy." Youko laughed and turned to the golden-haired youngster accompanying him. "We haven't seen each other in a long time either, En Taiho."

"Yep," said Enki Rokuta, already heading for the Forbidden Gate. "About that Tai general, is she up to seeing visitors?"

"More or less."

Youko guided her two guests of honor into the Imperial Palace. Along the way, she addressed their questions about Risai's tumultuous arrival. Risai still could not move and was confined to her bedroom in a corner of the Seishin where her needs could be attended to.

"The doctors said that it's okay to move her now, so I think we'll get her more accessible facilities. As long as she's awake, she should be up for conversation, but don't expect anything long and drawn out. The other day, she faded quite badly in the middle of our discussion."

"What have you heard of conditions in Tai?"

"Only the bare minimum so far, but— Ah, Koukan."

Koukan was waiting for them at the entrance to the Inner Palace, Keiki and the Taishi Enho standing behind him. After exchanging greetings, they headed together to the Sekisui-dai in the back quarter of the Imperial Library.

"According to Risai, both the Imperial Tai and Taiki have gone missing."

"So it would appear," agreed Shouryuu as he sat down. "We have made repeated searches, but there is no Taika on Mt. Hou. That means Taiki is not dead. Because the Phoenix has not cried out, the Imperial Tai must still be alive as well. The general opinion, according to refugees from Tai, is that there was a coup d'etat. For now, that's the most likely possibility."

"It would agree with Risai's explanations. The Imperial Tai left the capital to suppress an uprising and wasn't heard from again. But hard facts remain hard to pin down."

"Something happened as he departed for the front. He's not dead, but neither is he safe. Perhaps he was taken captive, or was being stalked by assassins and had to lie low. In any case, the rebels have Tai under their thumb. The Imperial Tai is not in the position to strike back at them and reclaim the throne. But what about Taiki?"

"The details are similarly unclear. His whereabouts are also unknown. For some reason, a shoku—a *meishoku*—is said to have occurred in the vicinity of the Imperial Palace. Hakkei Palace reportedly sustained heavy damage."

"A *meishoku*?" Rokuta said in a startled voice. A grave expression clouded his face.

"Yes, and afterwards Taiki disappeared. Risai says that the rubble was repeatedly searched but no trace of him could be found."

"That leaves me with a bad feeling."

"A bad feeling?"

Rokuta nodded. "The occurrence of a shoku must mean that something calamitous happened to Taiki's person. Unless the damage is grievous, a shoku is not likely to happen."

"You really think so."

Rokuta nodded again. "A *meishoku* occurred and Taiki disappeared. Meaning that some accident or disaster took place, and reacting to the emergency, Taiki triggered a *meishoku*. That'd be a better way of putting it. Worse case scenario, Taiki isn't even in this world anymore."

"You mean, he's over *there*?"



"Hard to say, but something catastrophic occurred. In order to escape, Taiki caused a shoku and fled to the other world. The most likely explanation. If that was all there was to it, then returning wouldn't be a problem. Normally, considering that he's been gone now for six years, I'd have to wonder if something else is going on."

Youko nodded and looked at Shouryuu. "Given these circumstances, what do you make of this situation?"

"By which you mean?"

"I mean, if the Imperial Tai had died, then Taiki would choose the next emperor, right? And even if the Imperial Tai is okay, if Taiki was dead then the Imperial Tai would die not long after, in which case a new taika would be born on Mt. Hou. The new kirin of Tai would choose the new emperor of Tai."

"That is indeed the case."

"However, Taiki is not dead. So there's no reason for the next kirin to be born, right? But we don't believe the Imperial Tai is dead either. If Taiki is alive and well, there's no need to chose a new emperor."

Shouryuu agreed. "That is the sum of it. Because both the Imperial Tai and Taiki continue to live, it stands to reason that there should be no change of government in Tai."

"But large numbers of refugees are leaving the shores of Tai. Tai is currently in a terrible state of affairs."

"Yes it is. Swarms of youma are flocking to the coasts. The once numerous flow of refugees has dwindled considerably."

"A pretender sits on the throne. The appropriate enthronement rites and rituals have not taken place. The kingdom is still in chaos. Don't we have any way of correcting these injustices?"

"As long as the true emperor lives, the term *pretender* doesn't technically apply. But it's close enough. In situations like this, the only recourse is for the people of Tai to rise up. We don't know what has become of the Imperial Tai and Taiki, but the province lords and the people must unite and strike back against the pretender. Doing so remains true to the rule of law."

"But it's been six years since Tai published an Imperial Rescript stating that the Imperial Tai was dead. If all that was needed to strike at the pretender was a call to action, then it would have happened already. Didn't Risai risk life and limb to come here and petition me because that was not possible?"

"Probably."

"At any rate, even after having you come all the way here, we haven't gotten hold of any really useful information. In the final analysis, things in Tai are the way they are. Even a shoku occurring on the grounds of the Inner Palace and causing a great deal of damage was news to us. All evidence indicates that the chief government officials and senior statesman who would know the most about the situation—not to mention the citizens of the capital—haven't been able to escape. Risai is the sole exception. It's from her account alone that we know about the desperate straits Tai is in."

Shouryuu and Rokuta fell silent.

"Risai has no means to save the people of Tai by herself. Even if we could dispatch people solely to search for the Imperial Tai and Taiki—"

Youko hadn't finished her thought when Shouryuu raised his voice. "That is as much as we understand about Tai. But that is not what we came here to tell you. We came here to put a stop to *that*."

"To what?"

"Listen. No matter what happens, you cannot send the Imperial Army to Tai."

Youko blinked. "Why not?"

"Because you can't. That's what it comes down to."

"Didn't I return to Kei with your backing?"

"That was different," Shouryuu replied fiercely. "You petitioned in person for my assistance. The Imperial Kei was driven from her kingdom and sought refuge in En. I did nothing more than lend her the use of my Imperial Army."

"Splitting hairs, as far as I'm concerned."

"So it may be, but that doesn't change anything. It's the Law of Heaven. The sin of leading troops into another kingdom for any reason brings down

immediate consequences. A violation so severe that both the emperor and kirin will succumb in days.”

Youko cast a bewildered look around the room. Taishi Enho nodded. “Are you familiar with the Jun Tei incident?”

“No.”

“Long ago in the kingdom of Sai there was an emperor by the name of Jun Tei. During his reign, the emperor of the neighboring kingdom of Han strayed from the Way. His subjects suffered great privations. Feeling pity for the people of Han, he dispatched the Imperial Army. To be precise, he had no intent of striking against the head of another kingdom. He stationed troops in villages close to the borders of Han to assist people from Han wishing to cross the border into Sai. He was doing nothing more than trying to effect an evacuation, but a scant few days after the Imperial Guard crossed into Han, the kirin died. Jun Tei soon followed him. This was not something Heaven allows under any circumstances.”

“But that—”

Shouryuu shook his head. “Even if you say that you are doing the will of Heaven, there are no allowances. Even if you invade nothing, usurp nothing, and do it all for the welfare of the people, the armies of one kingdom cannot trespass upon another. However pure the motives, Providence has declared this the sin of all sins. Moreover, after the Jun Tei incident, the imperial family name (*kokushi*) changed from the character for “purity” to the character for “baton of command.”

With a look taking them all in, Shouryuu said, “When Jun Tei died, the engraved characters disappeared from the Imperial Seal as they usually do. But when the new emperor ascended to the throne, the characters on the seal changed to the latter. The actions of the emperor themselves changed the Imperial Seal. That was how grave his sin was. The *kokushi* of a kingdom rarely changes, which indicates the seriousness of this matter.”

“So we just abandon them to their own devices?”

“I didn’t say that. There are people there in distress and it is right to do what we can to help them. However, that is definitely not so simple a task as it sounds. The fortunes of Kei weight in the balance. You must not act rashly.”

"I can understand why you would advise leaving them be. But you don't know how much Risai suffered to get to Kinpa Palace. How can you tell me to turn away someone who has gone to such lengths to seek my aid?"

"You misunderstand. You are the Empress of Kei. Not the Tai Emperor."

"But—"

Shouryuu held up his hand. "Some among the refugees say that the Imperial Tai was assassinated and Taiki with him. They also say the assassin was General Ryuu of the Zui Provincial Guard."

"Nonsense."

"I do not believe the Imperial Tai and Taiki are dead, and I do not put much stock in rumors. Still, you need to keep in mind that not a few of the refugees have offered up the name General Ryuu as the leader of the rebels."

# Chapter 17

[3-2] Risai's doctor permitted her to move to separate accommodations. She still could not stand under her own power and had to be transported by palanquin. With Koshou leading the way, she was taken to a manor house adjacent the Inner Palace, to a room facing a garden.

As she was placed on the ottoman, a child ran out from the nearby bedroom. "Welcome home! We've straightened everything up for you. I made sure it was all done myself!"

"Is that so?" Koshou laughed, resting his hand on the child's shoulder. "This here's Keikei. Think of him as my kid brother. Keikei, this lady's going to be living with us. Maybe I'll get her to look after you. She's a general from Tai. Her name is Lady Risai."

The boy looked at Risai with an unclouded smile. "Did you get hurt badly? Does it hurt?"

"I'm doing fine. I must apologize for placing such a burden on you, Keikei-dono."

"Oh, you don't need to call me stuff like that. You can treat me like your butler." The boy looked up at Koshou. "Ah," he said, "Some people from the Ministry of Summer were here. They left the kijuu in the stables. Can I take care of him?"

"If Risai says it's okay. That's Risai's kijuu."

"Wow," said Kaikai, appealing to Risai with a look of wonder and expectation on his face.

"Kijuu?" queried Risai, turning to Koshou. "Hien?"

"Yeah, your kijuu's doing fine. I wanted you to see for yourself, but the Minister of Heaven was dead-set against bringing him into the palace."

“I wish there were some way of conveying my thanks.”

“Naw, nothing to thank me for. That aside, you think it’d be okay for Keikei to take care of him? He hasn’t ever looked after a kijuu before. You’d have to spell out the particulars for him.”

“But of course,” Risai said, and Keikei reacted with a quiet yelp of triumph.

“In the meantime, would our guest like a cup of tea?” suggested Koshou.

Keikei leapt to his feet. “Oh, I forgot,” he said, his clear voice echoing off the walls as he ran out of the room.

“I don’t mean to pry,” said Risai, “but is the child yours?”

“Ah, no. Not related in the slightest. All his relatives got killed and Youko took him under her wing.”

“Youko—you mean, the Imperial Kei?”

“Yep. Though she doesn’t have the time to look after him, so she asked me to.”

“This is your house, I take it?”

“Hmm, hard to say whose it is.”

Risai blinked.

“Probably best to call it the Taishi’s residence, I think. We’re taking up a corner at the back of the Taishi’s offices, living here thanks to Enho’s good graces. Or perhaps I should say he’s letting us occupy a few of his bedrooms.”

“Then Koshou and the Taishi are related?”

“Ah, no, not at all.”

“I’m sorry to keep asking, but I’m just wondering—”

Risai was puzzling over this when Keikei bounded back into the room, carrying the tea set. “Hey, Koshou. Youko’s coming.”

“Youko is?”

“Yeah. She says she wants to talk to Risai. She asked if it was okay for her to come in.”

“Yes, please.”

Koshou and Keikei nodded and withdrew. After they left, five people entered the room. The Imperial Kei at the lead. Keiki and the Chousai, whom she'd met the other day. And then a man she'd never seen before, and a golden-haired child."

"This is the Imperial En of the Kingdom of En and the En Taiho."

Startled, Risai looked back and forth between the emperor and his chief retainer. "But why have Your Majesties—?"

"It seems they share a connection with the Imperial Tai and Tai Taiho. Now, Risai, would you mind picking up where you left off yesterday? We would like to hear your honest assessment of the current conditions of things in Tai."

Risai pressed her hand against her chest. "Tai is in a terrible condition. The absence of His Highness and the Taiho has made things all the worse."

The empress's green eyes examined her closely. "Among the Tai refugees are some who say the Imperial Tai and Taiho were assassinated. And the assassin was a general of the Zui Provincial Guard."

Risai eyes widened in shock. "That's not right! They're mistaken!"

"We just need confirm the truth. Don't get upset."

Risai tried to rise to her feet. Youko restrained her.

"It's not true. Yes, I was labeled a traitor and pursued for a long time. But nothing could be further from the truth."

"I understand."

Risai looked up and saw the concern in her eyes. She breathed a sigh of relief. Whether from the stress or the relief, a strong sense of fatigue washed over her.

"Countless orders were issued for my capture on the grounds that I committed regicide, or that somebody behind the scenes manipulated me into doing so. All of them were wrong."

Risai grasped the jewel hanging against the chest in her hand.

At the same time Gyousou set out for Bun Province, Risai and her soldiers and the rest of the Imperial Army left took up their stations around Kouki. There

were countless other tasks to tend to besides the defense of the capital. They had to take over the duties of that portion of the soldiers heading for Bun Province as well.

In the midst of everything, rumors began circulating around the Imperial Palace. Working herself to exhaustion on a daily basis, Risai was perhaps the last person to hear them for herself. From early morning until late at night, she had been tending to business in Kouki, picking up the slack left by the missing soldiers.

Returning exhausted to her quarters in the evening, she found Kaei waiting with an anxious expression on her face. “I hope I haven’t kept you waiting long,” Risai said apprehensively, entering the parlor. A servant had told her that Kaei had been awaiting her return.

Spring was still in the offing and the main hall was cold and dark, so the servants brought her here. Sitting there all alone, Kaei struck her as all the more dispirited and disheartened.

“You should have sent a messenger. I would have returned earlier,” Risai said.

Kaei started a bit and laughed. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I know how busy you are. I’m sorry to intrude.”

The housekeeper had apparently sensed the need and set out something for her to eat and drink, but it didn’t look like Kaei had touched any of it. Her tense appearance and the look on her face when their eyes met told Risai that she had not come here bearing glad tidings.

“Risai, have you heard the strange rumors circulating about?”

“Rumors?”

“Yes. I’m not well connected with military matters, so I’m not sure how to react, but—” She looked closely at Risai’s face. “There are some who say that His Highness’s expedition to Tetsui in Bun Province is a bridge too far.”

“A bridge too far?”

Kaei nodded, nervously folding her hands together. “Tetsui is a region with which His Highness shares a deep connection. It seems hard to believe that His

Highness would go there himself to suppress a mere rebellion. He went there expressly because it is Tetsui, or so some people are saying.”

“That may well be so. But neither Ganchou, Asen, Eishou, nor any of the generals of the Palace Guard, expressed any dissatisfaction about suppressing this local rebellion. In fact, His Highness first sent Eishou. The rebellion grew, and confirming that things were growing too hot for him to handle alone, he concluded that others should be dispatched. But it was not necessary for him to go. And yet he went so far as to divide Asen’s army, and set off with those men under his command. I think it highly likely that he did so because the objective was Tetsui.”

As she spoke, as if testing the explanation out on herself, Risai had the feeling as well that this might have been a bridge too far. Because the objective was Tetsui, she couldn’t recall any objections to his leading troops to the front. But hearing herself put it into words, the explanation did have an odd smell about it.

Kaei nodded as if to indicate she found the explanation convincing. Her countenance remained dark. “We anticipated that people might take advantage of the mayhem in the wake of the winter hunt and cause trouble. The rebels in Bun Province were chief among them. We were not surprised that the upheavals occurred there first. However, that the rebellion should have broken out in *Tetsui*, of all places, strikes me as perhaps a bit *too* obvious.”

“When you put it that way, it does seem strange. There was Bun Province and Tetsui in the middle of it, and so nobody thought was it odd that His Highness should go there. That naturally made Tetsui the logical bait to lure him out.”

Person or persons unknown had intentionally drawn him there. Risai looked at the anxious Kaei, that one thought occupying her mind. “I have a hard time believing that this could be part of an act of high treason against His Highness.”

“Wouldn’t you think so? But there are people who say everything’s the opposite of what it seems.”

“The opposite? What would the opposite be?”

“I’m not sure that I can explain it well enough—” Kaei fell silent as she searched for the right words. “Let’s say there were people who wished to harm His Highness. It would be difficult to attack him in the Imperial Palace. But if he

could be drawn away from the Imperial Palace, to a place ravaged by war and chaos, they would have on their hands an unprecedented opportunity. Therefore, the traitors have sown disorder and lured out His Highness. Still, if this chaos simply sprang out of nowhere, His Highness would surely be suspicious. Just because violence breaks out somewhere doesn't mean that His Highness will attend to it personally. So they exploited the rebels in Bun Province. Disorder arising there would look like more of the same. Except that Tetsui is in Bun. Knowing that Tetsui and His Highness share a strong bond together, if something were to happen in Tetsui, then His Highness would want to go there to help. Those planning a coup d'etat would be sure to take advantage of Bun Province and Tetsui."

"That does seem a strong possibility."

"But taking the contrary point of view, it was always highly likely that if something happened in Tetsui, His Highness would journey there. In other words, under such circumstances, it would be perfectly natural for His Highness to leave the palace."

"I really don't—" *I really don't understand*, Risai was about to say when Kaei interrupted her.

"To sum up, I have to wonder if His Highness had this in mind all along. He needed some reason to leave the Imperial Palace. By which I mean, the Imperial Court just having been put in order, he had no good reason to vacate the premises. So perhaps he was the one using Tetsui to further his aims."

"I understand that it'd hardly be unnatural for His Highness to depart for Tetsui in order to counter dangers there. But as you have pointed out, why would he choose to do so at this time? Why would it be necessary for him to leave his home base so thinly occupied?"

"Perhaps a continuation of the winter hunt," Kaei said in a low voice.

"That can't be," Risai laughed. "This time His Highness is definitely putting down a rebellion. With the palace left empty, those with treachery on their minds might start something. But I haven't heard of any plans like that."

"I agree. That's why I'm left to conclude that this is a kind of test. In the worst case scenario, a way to test our mettle."

"That's impossible!" said Risai, raising her voice. "I can't even imagine—"

Risai didn't harbor even the faintest of second thoughts about Gyousou. She didn't want any behavior of hers to be taken as harboring second thoughts. She'd come a long way under Gyousou's personal tutelage, and had forged a strong connection with Taiki.

Kaei shrank back a bit, her face tense. "I want to believe that too. But I'm just saying, look at the people left behind—"

"The people left behind?"

"Ganchou-dono and Asen-dono of the Palace Guard. You and Gashin-dono of the Zui Provincial Guard. Of these, Ganchou and Gashin served under the command of His Highness. During the reign of Emperor Kyou, Asen-dono was a General of the Palace Guard of the Right while you were a general in the Jou Provincial Guard. Two generals who were under his command and two generals who were not. His Highness divided Asen's army and took half with him to Bun Province. In short, Asen's fighting strength has been halved."

"Those are mere suspicions."

"The Ministry of Summer is more deeply involved with the subjugation of the chaos than anything else. The Ministry of Winter is responsible for arming the troops. Haboku-dono is the Daishiba of the Ministry of Summer. Rousan-dono is the Daishikuu of the Ministry of Winter. Naturally, both of them were His Highness's subordinates when he was general. With His Highness gone from the palace, the Taiho is left behind by himself. But close by are Vice Minister Seirai of the Provincial Government and Kaihaku-dono of the Ministry of Heaven. And they were once His Highness's subordinates too. The only ones who weren't are myself, from the Ministry of Fall, Chou'un-dono from the Ministry of Spring, and Senkaku-dono from the Ministry of Earth. When it comes to the subjugation of the chaos, we have been mostly kept out of the loop. We haven't been filled in on the details. Apparently there is no need for us to know—"

"The Chousai is here. It's not possible that the troops could be mobilized without the participation of the Chousai, and he wasn't one of Gyousou's previous subordinates. He was the Province Lord of Sui." Risai shook her head. "I think your suspicions are getting the better of you. His Highness was originally a

general, so the first people to place their trust in him belonged to his army. That also means that those with the closest ties to him are going to have military backgrounds. Go back to the roots and it all makes sense, doesn't it? The people involved with putting down the rebellion are his subordinates—those who aren't newcomers. This doesn't strike me as some kind of stratagem but simply the result of matching the right people to the right job. I think that's a better way to look at it."

"I suppose so." Kaei uneasily touched her fingers to her forehead. "When people tell me about these rumors, they make me shiver. To be honest, I feel like I'm all alone on this."

"Kaei."

"No, I don't mean to suggest any sympathies for the devil. It's just that I'm unaccustomed to the way His Highness thinks. Everything happening all at once has left me at loose ends. I feel this sense of estrangement. Helpless and forlorn, I end up coming here and crying on your shoulder."

Risai nodded.

"I now concur. Things have been proceeding at a rapid clip. But not more rapidly than necessary. My anxieties have abated as well. I have reasons enough to trust in His Highness's actions. I once had qualms of my own, which may have been obvious to other people. They could well have been taken in a negative light, but I probably would have shrugged off such reactions as inevitable. Being misunderstood like that is to be expected."

"Yes, but—"

"Chou'un-dono of the Ministry of Spring is of a like mind. Previously he was vocally quite critical of His Highness, and I know that Chousai Eichuu as well had doubts of his own. Asen and Ganchou, as well as yourself, have been the subject of unsavory rumors."

"Rumors about—me?"

"Yes," said Kaei, her blue lips trembling. "While serving in the Palace Guard during the reign of Emperor Kyou, Asen-dono and His Highness were known as the two jewels in the crown. One became the emperor and the other became his

retainer. There should be nothing remarkable about that, but—”

“I don’t believe it. And I am similarly implicated?”

“Yes. I find such rumors most distasteful, but you and His Highness went on the Shousan together. People say that you begrudge the fact that he was chosen instead of yourself. Ganchou-dono was originally one of General Gyousou’s commanders, though he earned his fame in the Palace Guard. When a position opened up in the Palace Guard, Ganchou supposedly expected that it would be given to him. His Highness was chosen at a remarkably young age. Ganchou served under General Gyousou for a long time. But turn over that rock and people are saying that in reality Ganchou holds it against him.”

“That’s crazy! With that kind of distrust swirling around, anybody’s past could be turned against him.”

“I think so too. This is all nothing more than bitterness.”

“It’s more than that. The Taiho chose His Highness right before my eyes. I’ve never harbored a moment of regret. Those who say *I* must be angry about it would themselves be furious and unforgiving if such a honor were taken from them right before their eyes, so they insist that *I* must be as well. They are convinced that everybody else must be just as despicable as they are. People like that—”

Risai interrupted herself in the middle of the sentence. At the end of the day, this amounted to nothing more than judging people by one’s own standards. A kind of commiseration that said that whatever one person found hurtful must be hurtful to all. That people judged others by the same standards as themselves was an unassailable fact of nature. Push come to shove, it wasn’t a problem somebody else could fix.

“Sorry. It’s just that there’s nothing odd about people like that. We all look at others the same way. I think Asen or Ganchou would agree. His Highness has shown Asen nothing but respect, and he treats Ganchou almost like family. Not so much an older brother, rather an older friend in whom he has great faith. Ganchou in turn seems to take pride in His Highness’s accomplishments.”

“Yes, indeed.”

"I don't think His Highness leaving the palace unoccupied is some way of punishing us. In the first place, he left the Taiho behind as well. If he really intended to continue the winter hunt, there's no way he would leave the Taiho to his own devices."

"But of course," said Kaei with relieved smile.

"Except it's possible he has doubts about some among us and wishes to observe what moves we may make. That's the only possibility I can't come to any definite conclusions about. Leaving the Taiho here in any case worries me. Of course, the thought that he is doing so in order to lure someone out—"

"Indeed—" said Kaei, a firm expression on her face. "Shouldn't His Highness should be arriving in Bun Province by now? I can only hope that everything goes smoothly after this."

Risai nodded. "Ganchou and the others are saying so as well. Until His Highness returns, we should all be on our toes and pricking up our ears."

The next day after listening to Risai's story, Ganchou laughed heartily. "People do seem to be coming up with all sorts of crazy ideas."

"Yes. Those with bad intentions and those who persist in seeing bad intentions in others," Asen added with a thin smile.

Gashin sighed. "So why is my name the only one left out? It's disappointing to discover that you're considered such small fry that you don't qualify as being sufficiently envious of Gyousou-sama."

Risai laughed. Her talk with Kaei the night before had left her in an uneasy state of mind. But seeing their relaxed manner, she concluded it was all needless anxiety. "Well, you being a bit player and all, I guess it can't be helped."

"So it really is that bad?" Gashin said with a chuckle.

Risai, though, counted Gashin as an exemplary tactician. During maneuvers with the Imperial Army, the opponent he was pitted against always proved the weakest. Against Ganchou and Sougen, who waged war soundly and on a proper footing, Gashin's generalship was cunning and clever. His feints were hard to read, and he was never caught unprepared.

Eishou was much the same, but Gashin's stratagems had a strange openness about them in contrast to Eishou's shadowy movements.

"If you're going to be suspicious of anybody, I'd think Eishou would be the best candidate. If anybody's going to go stabbing Gyousou-sama in the back, it'd have to be Eishou."

"No doubt about that. Besides, don't you think Eishou and Seirai are two peas in a pod?"

"Seeing that Seirai doesn't possess a single redeeming feature, there's no need to feel guilty about kicking the man when he's down. Eishou said so himself."

Risai grinned. "I believe Seirai said much the same thing. Eishou is black to the core."

"But of course. Like breeds like."

Asen burst out laughing. "Well, now," he said, "some respect is called for. Expecting another repeat of Tetsui in Bun Province is asking for quite a lot."

Ganchou stopped smiling at once and nodded. While Asen wasn't one of Gyousou's previous subordinates, his opinions were treated with all due respect. Risai had once faced off against him during recruit training. Her impression of him as a general was that he had a fine grasp of tactics. Risai had never fenced with Gyousou, but according to what she'd heard, on the battlefield, Asen and Gyousou had much in common. They had come to be known as the two jewels in the crown.

Ganchou folded his hefty arms. "You seem to be suggesting that it'd be wise to have someone who's on good terms with Bun Province look into this matter further."

"And subtly inform Gyousou-sama. We should send a messenger pigeon his way."

# Chapter 18

[3-3] That evening, Risai was on her way to the Provincial government offices when Taiki ran over from the adjoining arboretum. Glancing about as he came down the gallery, he spotted Risai, cried out and raced up to her. Normally his voice would be bright with cherubic laughter. This day, though, he wore a harried look on his face.

"Risai, I've been looking for you," he said, grasping Risai's hand, almost clinging to her. "It is true that Gyousou-sama is in trouble?"

"In trouble?"

"Gyousou-sama left because bad people were plotting against him. They are lying in wait in Bun Province to attack him."

"Nonsense," Risai said with a forced smile. "Who's planting such silly ideas in your head? Gyousou-sama went to Bun Province to calm the waters there."

Taiki pulled away from her. His countenance hardened. "That's what Seirai said too."

"Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it? There's nothing for you to be worried about."

Taiki shook his head. "You and Seirai are telling fibs. You don't want me to worry because I'm a kid."

Bewildered, Risai knelt and looked Taiki in the eyes. "I'm not telling fibs. Why wouldn't I tell you the truth?"

"Nobody tells me what they talk about in the Rikkan. But Rousan told me."

Risai furrowed her brows. She knew that Kaei had convened the Rikkan to discuss the same subject Risai had brought up with her colleagues. She could assume as well that they would have debated whether or not to tell Taiki. Taiki's

permission was necessary in order to mobilize the Provincial Guard. For the time being, as Minister-in-Chief of Zui Province, Seirai served as Taiki's regent in such matters. Getting to the bottom of rumors so nebulous to begin with remained an exercise in guesswork. At this point, she would expect that they'd come to the decision that there was no need to inform Taiki and worry him needlessly.

That Rousan, the Minister of Winter, was telling him such things—



"When I ask Seirai, he says I have nothing to be worried about. It's only a minor rebellion and Gyousou-sama isn't going there to fight but to rally the people. There's no danger and I have no cause for concern. Everything's going to be all right. That's just what Rousan said he would say."

Risai stood up and urged the unhappy Taiho to return to the garden. She said in a low voice, "There's no telling who might be coming by here. If they see the Taiho in such a state, the ministers are likely to get the wrong idea."

"But—"

Risai smiled. "The Saiho shouldn't behave in such a manner as to cause the ministers needless worry, should he? I'll walk you back to your quarters."

She took the hand of the dejected Taiki and set off towards the Seishin, continuing their conversation in as cheerful a voice as she could muster. She spoke of her own anxieties about the manner in which Gyousou had left the Imperial Palace; the wild speculations being tossed about; and among them the rumors that it was part of a scheme to lure Gyousou to Bun Province.

Emphasizing that these rumors too were nothing more than rumors. If too widely noised about, who knew what damage would result. The Rikkan and the generals were conferring about how to face that threat.

"That a rebellion has occurred is a fact. So I can't say that there is no risk in His Highness's journey to Bun Province. But Eishou is serving as his vanguard and Sougen is accompanying him. Add to that Gyousou-sama's strengths as a general, and too much worry might come across as discourteous."

"But they say that Eishou was having a hard time of things. Didn't he ask Gyousou-sama to assist him?"

The surprised look in Risai's eyes answered the question. "Yes, the rebellion proved fiercer than expected and it is true that Eishou found things hard to handle. But he didn't ask for help. His Highness and Sougen went there to rally the people and the troops and bring peace to Bun Province as quickly as possible."

"Really?"

Risai smiled and nodded. Taiki drew a relieved breath, replacing the worried

expression on his face. Hoping to raise his spirits, Risai fumbled around for something else to talk about, but Taiki wasn't paying much attention. About the time the Seishin and Seiden came into view, she'd run out of things to say. She got the feeling he hadn't decided whether or not to trust what she'd told him.

"It seems you're still not ready to believe me," she pressed gently.

Taiki looked up at her with a confused countenance. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm supposed to think." As he spoke, his head lowered, the hard expression remained on his face. "I'm a kid, so everybody treats me like I'm something special. They don't let me see stuff and won't talk to me about stuff. And when they do, everybody knows it's too difficult for me to understand and they think they can't have me worrying about stuff I don't understand, so they don't say anything. Since it goes on all the time, I can't say whether you're telling me the truth or not."

"Taiho—"

"I mean, if what Rousan is saying is true, and if what the civil servants are talking about are true, you're still going to tell me differently. You and Seirai and everybody else."

Taiki let out a strained sigh and continued. "It's because I'm a kid, and there's nothing I can do about that. But I'm worried about Gyousou-sama too. He took off to a dangerous place far away. I don't want him to get injured or his life to be in danger. If something bad happens, I want to help him. I know everybody thinks I can't do anything, but I still want to try the best I can and figure out *something*—"

Taiki stopped talking. Tears filled his eyes. A air of despondency radiated from his body. "*Isn't this my job?* That's what I can't help thinking. But as far as everybody else is concerned, I'm just an unwelcome burden."

Risai felt a pain in her heart. Taiki was still a youngster. That was why everybody went out of their way to avoid causing this pure-hearted child any pain or suffering. It was all done with the best of intentions, but from Taiki's point of view, he was being ostracized because of his age and small stature. Risai had to wonder what Gyousou would do in her place.

"That surely isn't the case, Taiki," she said.

Taiki let go of her hand and ran through the gate. Watching him leave, she sighed deeply, turned on her heels, and headed to the Ministry of Winter.

Rousan was still at the ministry. Risai informed her secretary that she wished to see her. After a short wait Risai was invited into her office. Rousan seemed buried up to her neck in correspondence and official paperwork.

Rousan glanced up from the volume she was perusing and said, gesturing with her hand, “Find yourself someplace to sit down.”

She looked like a young girl of sixteen or so, hardly an appearance that agreed with her position as head of the Rikkan. But her scholarship was vast and deep. As the Daishikuu of the Ministry of Winter there was certain nobody else as capable. Rousan was said to be a veritable polymath.

Her portfolio included the *Shoushi*, *Genshi* and *Gishi*. These departments manufactured goods and material for the kingdom, made amulets and charms, and explored new technologies. They employed countless numbers of artisans, and Rousan could fluently speak to any one of them in the jargon of their trade and make herself understood.

Risai said, as if speaking her thoughts aloud, “Why have you been saying such things to the Taiho?”

Rousan abruptly raised her head. The expression on her face said she knew exactly that Risai was referring to. “Because I thought somebody should bring it to his knowledge.”

“At this point, it all amounts to little more than rumor and innuendo. Telling him such things—”

“You mean, don’t go filling his head with such nonsense and causing him needless worry? Yet the fact remains that there well might be a conspiracy against Gyousou-sama in the works.”

“That is only a possibility.”

“Which makes it possible. If true, it is a grave matter indeed. I don’t think the Taiho is better off staying in the dark.”

“But—” Risai started to respond.

Rousan scowled and shut the book. She folded one leg beneath her on the chair and rested her chin in her hand. “If you ask me, you’re all treating the kirin with kid gloves. I understand this impulse to pamper him, but when it comes to the affairs of the Kingdom, there are limits. Let’s pretend this isn’t just some rebellion in a far-off province but a full-scale insurrection in the works. How can the Saiho of the Kingdom not be informed? The Saiho has his duties as Saiho. Age is beside the point. If the Provincial Guard has to be mobilized, he must first grant permission.”

“That is true, but—”

“So don’t come barging in here with that scary look on your face. I’m the one acting logically. Everybody around here is letting their emotions get the better of them.”

Risai was at a loss for words. She couldn’t quibble with what Rousan was saying.

“But now that we’re on the subject, if something has happened to His Highness, how do we proceed? The Taiho may be small and his faculties limited, but he’s not powerless. This current course of action will only make things worse. How is feeling sorry for the Taiho and covering for him any different than taking him for granted? If His Highness is in danger, and the Taiho can do something to save him, we should take all steps to allow him to do so. Denying him that opportunity is the crueler course.”

Risai couldn’t help recalling Taiki’s despondent air. “That’s right.”

A small, satisfied smile came to Rousan’s lips. “You catch on fast, Risai. That’s good to know.”

Risai smiled wryly in turn. “Rousan-dono, do you think this is an assassination attempt?”

Rousan drew her knees up to her chest and took a deep breath. “I wish I knew. And even if we did, we probably couldn’t get there in time. Bun Province is far enough from here that it’d take several days using the air corps. Push come to shove, we don’t want to end up relying on those jewels in the crown to pull us through. However, the only people who can wield them are the heads of state: the emperor and kirin. Under the pressure of necessity, the Taiho’s shirei would

be the quickest, most likely, and most reliable candidates.”

Risai started. Rousan glanced at her teasingly from beneath her brows. “If you ask me, none of you are aware yourselves of the extent to which you’ve been treating the Taiho as an incompetent child. It’s around somewhere, isn’t it? The *toutetsu*?”

“Yes—it is—”

The kirin commanded youma known as the *shirei*. Taiki had the misfortune of being born and raised in Yamato. Consequently, he had only two shirei, a sadly small number. One was the guardian *nyokai* that raised him and so really didn’t qualify. Technically speaking, he had one shirei: the toutetsu. A powerful youma, more legend than real.

“The monster of all monsters. That’s the toutetsu. Look at you, calling a kirin who can charm a beast like that a *child*. It makes me wonder who the real children are.” Rousan narrowed her eyes and stared off into space. “It would not be too great an exaggeration to say that the only monster superior to the toutetsu is that dear, little kirin.”

# Chapter 19

[3-4] Risai and her colleagues had been anxious to lay their hands on evidence proving—or better, *disproving*—that the rebellion in Bun Province was part of a larger insurrection. The results of their investigations were slow in coming.

They didn't have access to anybody with strong ties to Bun Province. And nobody else seemed to be acting out of the ordinary. Inside the Imperial Palace, claims that a suspicious figure had been seen here or there were often raised. These rumors as well always turned out to be held up by nothing but hot air.

And then the shoku turned everything upside down.

Risai rushed from the Romon to Jinjuu Manor. The place was a wreck. She ran into others who were congregating in places free from the wreckage of the gate towers

“Ah, Risai—”

“Gashin. The Taiho—”

“I don't know. I came here to see for myself.”

They continued on as they talked. One corner of Jinjuu Manor was a mountain of rubble. Seeing that the main building of palace complex—the Seiden—had not been spared, Risai felt a cold shiver run down her back.

Proceeding through the courtyard gardens, somebody called out to them. The Daiboku—Taiki's personal bodyguard—crawled out from a collapsed building. Seirai was clinging to his back.

“Tansui, the Taiho—” they shouted, as they raced up to them.

“No idea. I wasn't with him when it happened. What in the world is going on?”

The otherwise inexpressive man's expression had changed in the extreme. His head was blanketed with dust and pieces of the mortar. His body was covered

with dozens of small wounds. On his back, Seirai was in a similar state, though he didn't appear to be suffering any grievous wounds.

From somewhere within the ruins they heard a horse neighing in pain.

"Why weren't you with him?" Risai asked, drawing closer. "Where did you last see him?"

Tansui shook his head. "I was in the Seiden. Seirai called me back to the Seiden, so I left him there in the care of a retainer."

The rumblings in the earth had ceased at some point, replaced by the sounds of people groaning and screaming. Voices cried out for help, but before assisting them, Risai and her colleagues had a more important duty to attend to. *They must find Taiki.* That thought occupying her mind, she heard someone else calling out. Turning around, she saw several soldiers bearing Asen toward them.

"The Taiho—" were the first words from his mouth. He didn't look any better off than Tansui.

"The Seiden, it seems," Gashin replied.

He left Seirai in the care of the soldiers and accompanied Tansui and Risai into the building. Her thoughts were a frozen mass as she searched amidst the rubble. She saw no sign of Taiki anywhere, not in the Seiden and not in the surrounding grounds. The search continued on through the night and proved similarly fruitless.

The Imperial Palace had been severely damaged by the meishoku and many ministers and bureaucrats had been injured or were missing. Not surprisingly, in the living quarters and elsewhere, there were few deaths among the ministers because of their wizard class. But this was not to say there were none. And the losses among the ranks of the maids and menservants—those not listed upon the Registry of Wizards—were substantial.

Because of the number of injured bureaucrats and the chaotic condition of the court, the government came to a grinding halt. Nobody knew what to do next.

Then a messenger pigeon arrived from Bun Province. The message it carried only threw the state of political affairs into greater confusion and forced them to suspend the search for the time being.

"What has become of His Highness?" asked Risai.

Haboku replied, "According to Sougen's letter, His Highness disappeared in the midst of the battle. They searched for him but haven't found him. That's all they know at this juncture. They haven't the slightest idea what happened. I have directed that they—or only Sougen himself—return to the capital for the time being, but hurrying as fast as they can, and factoring in the time it'll take for the pigeon to fly there, it will be ten days before he can get back."

"How are things in Bun Province?" asked Ganchou.

Haboku shook his head. "By all accounts, the rebellion remains active. They seem to have fought their way to an impasse."

"So what do we do next?" asked Kaei.

Nobody had an answer that question. Nobody knew the best course to pursue, and none of them had the authority to pursue it. The Chousai was supposed to step in during the emperor's absence, except that Eichuu, the Chousai, had been injured during the meishoku and was still unable to get up or even speak. The emperor's principal advisor, the Saiho, was missing, and the civil servants of the Imperial Court who enacted the emperor's will in his name simply weren't there anymore.

"What are we supposed to do in a situation like this? Who gives direction to the ministers?"

"According to precedent," said Haboku, "the Minister of Heaven takes over the post of Chousai as head of the Rikkan."

They all fell silent. They had confirmed that at the time of the meishoku, the Minister of Heaven, Gaihaku, had been in the offices of the Sankou adjacent to Jinjuu Manor. The Sankou served as counselor to the emperor and advisor to the Saiho. Its offices had been damaged severely and were in a state of collapse. Of the Sankou and their assistants, two of the six were dead and one was severely wounded. The whereabouts of the remaining four—including Gaihaku—remained unknown.

Haboku said, "After the Minister of Heaven, I believe the job falls to the Minister of Earth."

Senkaku, the Minister of Earth, shook his head. “Impossible. I am in no way equal to the task.”

Having declined the honor, nobody tried to encourage Senkaku to accept it. Senkaku was a young, meek civil servant. Having been plucked out of Zui Province for the position, he had no previous connections to Gyousou or the Imperial Army. He was honest and forthright, but lacked experience.

Furthermore, at a critical time like this, an understanding of military affairs was a prerequisite. Gyousou’s was a military court, and most of the remaining ministers had been commanders under Gyousou. In that light, only someone with a military background—even from the lowest military ranks—would be able to unify the Imperial Court.

“What about Seirai-dono?” said Senkaku.

Nobody seconded the suggestion. Seirai was also injured and was resting, though his wounds did not appear mortal. Seirai was famed among the civil servants for having served as one of General Gyousou’s commanders and his personal retainer. That made him the best qualified to lead the ministers. Everybody there knew this, and yet no one else put forward his name.

“Until His Highness returns, if anybody is to knit the Imperial Court back together again, Seirai would be best. But that’s not the problem here.”

Everybody nodded. The problem wasn’t who would represent the ministers. If that’s all it came down to, Haboku or Seirai could do so ably. Or Senkaku or even Risai. That’s not where the problem lay. The problem was that Tai currently had no emperor.

They didn’t know the will of Gyousou. Had Gyousou died, the selection of the next emperor would take precedence over everything else.

If the throne was vacated, the Chousai would serve in his stead until a new emperor was enthroned. The badly injured Eichuu couldn’t fill the post. The Minister of Heaven was missing. And none of the others could muster a quorum of supporters, even provisionally. Unable to appeal to either established custom or Divine reason, it would be close to impossible for anyone to unite the Imperial Court. Nobody had the necessary authority.

"In other words," said Chou'un, of the Ministry of Fall, "should we take this to mean that no immediate replacement for the Chousai is forthcoming? Who can sufficiently unite our hearts and minds, stand as Chousai, and set up a provisional court?"

"You've got it backwards!" Ganchou said in an angry voice. "Gyousou-sama is missing, that's all! Sougen said so as well. Nobody says that he's dead. Confirmation of his well-being takes precedence over all else."

"Please hold on a minute," said Kaei, raising her voice. The strain and anxiety had left her pale face practically colorless. "What do we do in a situation like this? What is the customary practice?"

*"Situations like this?"* came voices around her. Kaei nodded. "I do not wish to raise such ominous possibilities, but please forebear for the time being. If, for example, His Highness had been slain, how would we proceed?"

Senkaku replied, "The Taiho would choose the next emperor."

"But the Taiho is missing as well."

"If the Taiho died as well, then the Kingdom is declared 'vacant.' According to precedent, the Chousai serves in place of the emperor and a temporary court is established. If Eichuu-dono is too unwell to fill the position, then it'd be necessary to appoint a new Chousai."

"And who makes the appointment?"

Senkaku couldn't answer.

"Don't the Taiho and emperor have the authority to appoint the Chousai? If the emperor is dead, then the Taiho acts. However, if both the emperor and the Taiho are dead, and there is no serving Chousai—have such conditions ever existed before?"

Haboku answered bitterly, "There are cases of the emperor and the Taiho perishing simultaneously. And the Chousai meeting the same fate at the same time. But in those cases a pretender had taken the throne, slaying the emperor and the Taiho along with the Chousai and the Minister of Heaven in the midst of an insurrection. Aside from situations like that, there's never been an incident where all those required to knit the Imperial Court together have been absent."

"The Chousai hasn't died," Senkaku interjected in a loud voice. "Although his wounds are severe, he is still conscious. The Imperial Seal is entrusted to the Chousai. The current Chousai can appoint the next."

"The only person able to bestow the Imperial Seal upon the next Chousai is the Taiho, and only if the Taiho has first taken it into his custody. Because the Taiho is not present, how do you propose bestowing the Imperial Seal on the next Chousai?"

"If His Highness had died, the Imperial Seal would become ineffective. In that case, the foot of the Hakuchi is used. With the foot of the Hakuchi, and following the recommendation of the Rikkan and the Sankou, the new Chousai can be appointed."

"So this would not be limited only to His Highness's death. But first we must confirm their well-being, and turn the Kingdom upside down looking for His Highness and the Taiho."

"But I ask you, who is to undertake such task encompassing the entire Kingdom? Without anybody to unite the ministers, do you think we can canvass the Kingdom from one end to the other?"

In the next moment, the assembly descended into confusion. Risai watched in amazement from her seat. Precedent covered the death of an emperor. Precedent covered the death of the Taiho. However, nobody had considered the possibility of them both missing, and their physical welfare unknown. If one or the other still lived, that precedent existed. But both of them missing—and yet not necessarily dead—was a situation whose vagueness nobody knew how to deal with.

"At any rate, even if the law must be set aside, the consent of His Highness—"

At that moment, a loud cry was raised: "The emperor is dead!"

The assembly room fell silent, quiet enough to hear a pin drop. Risai turned toward the sound of the voice. Asen stood in the entranceway to the assembly room. With all the commotion, nobody had noticed his absence.

Asen's eyes swept the room, and then he thrust forward his hand. His hand contained the foot of a bird.

"I am sorry to presume, but believing that a confirmation of His Highness's well being was of the first order, I took the liberty of visiting Godou Palace and the Castle of the Two Cries."

The assembly room filled with mingled groans. Asen said in a very quiet voice, "The Hakuchi has fallen from its perch. According to precedent, I removed its foot and carried it here."

# Chapter 20

[3-5] Risai stopped speaking. The five people in the room let out a collective exclamation of surprise.

“That means—” Youko said, and Risai nodded.

“The Hakuchi falling from its perch meant the emperor was dead. We all lost hope at that point. None of us had any cause to doubt Asen’s word.”

He’d once been Gyousou’s brother in arms. They were once known as the two jewels in the crown. Their friendship was said to encompass their professional and personal lives. After the passing of Emperor Kyou, Gyousou treated Asen as a brother, and Gyousou’s subordinates paid him all due respect. Asen as well repaid that trust and seemed well disposed toward Taiki.

From beneath the surface of the still, undisturbed waters, Asen had suddenly made his presence known.

The assembly room again fell quiet. The shock rendered everyone dumb. It was left to Asen to break the heavy silence.

“In any case, the victims of the disaster must be tended to. An area should be set aside to treat the injured officials and the servants. I believe that medical facilities should be set up in the Outer Court as quickly as possible.

Senkaku nodded, and then suddenly lifted his head. “Now that you mention it, what of Kouki?”

“The city appears unharmed,” answered Asen.

He’d dispatched his troops at once to help the residents of the city and confirmed that it was undamaged. The shoku had occurred above the Sea of Clouds, which had also shielded the world below from its effects. At any rate, a rescript was prepared ordering that an infirmary be set up to treat the wounded ministers and servants, to which the seal of the Hakuchi’s foot was applied.

At that stage, it finally occurred to somebody that the Imperial Seal—from which the impression would have disappeared—must be taken into safekeeping. Asen had already dispatched one of his subordinates to do so. But the Seishin had not escaped the damage and the Imperial Seal appeared lost among the rubble. A frantic search was said to be underway.

While the ministers ran around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off, Asen alone seized the day and did what had to be done.

That was one way the story was told.

After the death of the emperor, the foot of the Hakuchi became the Imperial Seal. Someone had to take charge of it. By right, that someone should be the Saiho, but he was missing. The Sankou bore the burden in the Taiho's absence, but they had perished, along with their retainers. The Chousai slept, grievously wounded.

Needless to say, the Imperial Palace was in utter chaos, and dealing with the chaos would require any number of orders and rescripts. The foot of the Hakuchi would be necessary for all of them. Someone had to take custody of the seal and notarize the documents.

It only seemed natural to hand that responsibility to the man bearing the foot of the Hakuchi. Asen. Nobody raised an objection. Considering their flustered states of mind, a general would do what had to be done. In this moment of crisis, better to rely on a military chain of command than the regular political bureaucracy. This Imperial Court had evolved as a martial court in the first place, and was well-disposed to taking directives from military officers.

Moreover, Asen once ranked alongside Gyousou in terms of talent, and many had hoped that he would be the next emperor. After acceding to the throne, Gyousou had granted him all due respect and had treated him warmly.

Such memories were on everybody's mind.

Gyousou had plowed his furrow with the sword. None of the regular civil servants could stand in for him now. The military personnel remaining in the capital consisted of Ganchou, Gashin and Risai. Ganchou and Gashin had worked their way up from the ranks and were thought ill-suited to the intricacies of political administration. Risai was a mere provincial soldier.

Asen knew the ins and outs of politics, having served under Gyousou as a general in the Palace Guard. Given a little thought, it only seemed right that he should follow in Gyousou's footsteps. So, for the time being, Asen would be in charge.

The general consensus was that the Imperial Court would be reorganized and a provisional court inaugurated once the emergency had passed and things had calmed down.

Without anybody explicitly agreeing to, the Hakuchi's foot was given to Asen for safekeeping. The mountain of paperwork that had to be dealt with was delivered to Asen, who in due course installed himself in the Inner Palace in order to adjudicate everything. Nobody sensed that there might be anything the least bit wrong with this.

Gashin was dispatched to continue the search and bring order to Bun Province. In turn, having lost their temporary commanding officer, the troops from Asen's division were recalled to the capital. And perhaps sensing that something was amiss in the Imperial Palace, chaos broke out in Risai's adoptive home province of Jou, forcing her to travel there with all due haste.

Kaei came to visit her late one night, two days before her planned departure.

"So you've been mobilized?"

"I'm the best person to attend to Jou Province, being familiar with the territory and all."

"Yes," agreed Kaei, though she looked no less worried than she always did, and more forlorn than usual. She stared hard at Risai's face, as if bidding her a final farewell.

"Don't worry. I know Jou Province backwards and forwards. I have a lot of friends and associates in the Jou Provincial Army. The revolt there is nothing like the one in Bun Province. Restoring order shouldn't take any time at all. I'll be back in no time at all."

"I would certainly expect so. I shall await your return home, the sooner the better." Kaei smiled thinly. She looked on the verge of tears. "Um, Risai, we're going to come out of this okay, right?"

"What's that?"

"His Highness and the Taiho are no longer with us. And yet the Kingdom is still rushing into a new era. I'm scared."

"Still?" Risai jested lightly.

Kaei replied with a strained smile. "I guess I'm always frightened by something."

Risai grinned. "That's for sure."

"But, Risai, I'm more frightened now than I was before. His Highness was like a runaway horse. Being the rider perched on the back of that horse was truly unnerving. Even now the Kingdom continues to dash on ahead. What are those of us in the saddle doing?"

"Eh?" said Risai, raising her voice and glancing back at Kaei's troubled face.

"No matter how impatient and overly confident his actions, His Highness was the true and undeniable Imperial Tai. He was chosen by the Taiho, received the Mandate of Heaven, and acceded to the throne. An unruly stallion perhaps, but most definitely Heaven's stallion. But now?"

For several seconds, Risai just looked at her. Kaei averted her eyes.

"We've gotten used to a provisional court before. A provisional court was in session from the time of Emperor Kyou's death until the coronation of His Highness. So I don't find that by itself discomfiting. But I'm growing more and more uneasy day by day. What is he up to? I mean, installing himself in the Inner Palace, using the Hakuchi's foot as an Imperial Seal?"

"You mean, Asen?"

"This is certainly not the decree of Heaven. The welfare of the Taiho has not been ascertained. If the Taiho were here, or even if he were dead, the current state of things wouldn't be so unusual. Yet is the Taiho really dead?"

"But Kaei—"

"The meishoku swept the Taiho away to that other world. If he was simply swept away, then he could return. That probably means he can't return even if he wishes to. However, as long as the Taiho is alive somewhere, there can be no

provisional court.” Kaei frowned. “If Asen is a pretender, then this is a pretender’s court.”

“Kaei!” Risai’s eyes flashed around the room. But these were Risai’s quarters and nobody else was there.

“Risai, you remember the rumors that circulated after His Highness departed for Bun Province?”

“That hoping for another Tetsui in Bun Province was a bridge too far?”

“Yes. But that wasn’t the only one. At the time, there was another rumor that attracted my attention.”

“Another rumor?”

“The same time as the rumor about a plot against His Highness. The rumor that His Highness had planned it all along, right? He left for Bun Province in order to test the mettle of those left behind in the capital. The remaining generals were Ganchou and Gashin and you. And Asen. Perhaps going so far as to divide Asen’s forces was His Highness’s way of hobbling Asen’s fighting strength.”

“That’s crazy.”

“At this point in time, I can’t help thinking that it maybe true. His Highness’s departure for Bun Province may have been something he had no choice but to do, above and beyond the state Tetsui was in. In any case, he even dared to divide Asen’s army, right? Perhaps that was a shot across Asen’s bow.”

“But when Gyousou-sama previously sent the Taiho to Ren, he sent Asen with him as an envoy. If he had any doubts about him, would he have done something like that?”

“Sougen was with them too. Sougen and Seirai and the Taiho’s Daiboku, Tansui, also accompanied him. Counting their subordinates, the Taiho had eight retainers with him. Even if His Highness suspected that Asen was up to no good, there wasn’t much Asen could have done. And because Asen went with him, he didn’t participate in the winter hunt. In short, he was never informed of the details of the plan. It’s possible that His Highness attached him to the mission to keep him in the dark.”

Risai didn't answer. She didn't believe everything Kaei was telling her. She didn't believe—but there were elements she found convincing. An insurrection had broken out in Bun Province. Tetsui was caught up in the chaos and Gyousou-sama was induced to go there. Taiki was sent to Ren to keep the details of the purge from him and Asen was assigned to accompany him as an envoy—

The two incidents had a familiar scent about them.

She could almost say there was something unnatural about the way both had so “naturally” unfolded. Everything was “normal” inside the eye of the hurricane. Everything looked the way it was supposed to. But flip the picture around and she would see a wolf clothed like a lamb. Or at least that was what she thought she should see.

It was like that slight sense of unease she could blame on her imagination but she couldn't bring herself to ignore. And there was something she'd heard once —how, as tacticians, Gyousou and Asen were so similar to each other.

*Perhaps*— Risai unconsciously caught her breath. She hadn't seen it either. Nobody noticed that beneath the surface, two matched forces had been testing each other's weak spots, locked together in a fierce contest. But hadn't they seen the ripples here and there playing across the water's surface?

Most people overlooked them. Others had taken notice. At the time, Kaei had felt that sense of anomie. There were moment Risai sensed something in the wind. Here and there a great number of people had caught a faint whiff of discord, only magnified by tangled rumors that showed no sign of abating.

Risai trembled slightly. Two days hence in the early morning hours she would be leaving Kouki for Jou Province. Revolt had broken out in Jou Province, now of all times. When she considered the generals remaining behind, Risai felt that going to Jou Province was the proper thing to do. But still—

“Risai, if these all prove to be groundless fears, that's fine with me. No, it's just my cowardly nature giving rise to these unjust suspicions.” Kaei grasped her hand and said, “Come back safely. And laugh at me for being such a silly girl.”

Risai nodded.

The day after next, Risai left Kouki in the early morning light, her heart gripped

in blackness.

That was the last time she had seen Kouki.

# Chapter 21

[3-6] Risai took a deep breath and squeezed the jewel in her palm. “I had no choice but to go to Jou Province. I arrived a fortnight after leaving Zui Province. Several days after crossing the border, a young civil servant stumbled into our camp.”

He said, “Please help me. They’re going to kill me.”

He was in terrible condition and was trembling all over. He didn’t look like a government official. He was wearing the dirty farming clothes that peasants wear, suggesting that he intended to pass himself off as a refugee in order to escape his pursuers.

“I’m a retainer to the Daiboku of the Ministry of Spring. I was assigned to the Castle of the Two Cries.”

He presented his insignia. The insignia was fashioned from a length of plaited cord the width of three fingers. The color and length differed according to the rank of the person holding it. The insignia he took from his tattered pocket was indeed that of Nisei-shi of the Daiboku of the Ministry of Spring.

As his name suggested, Nisei-shi attended to the Hakuchin in the *Nisei-kyuu* (“Castle of the Two Cries”).

“What is this about, Nisei-shi?”

“It’s the General. The General of the Palace Guard. The Palace Guard of the Right.”

“Asen.”

“Yes. The former General Jou. The night of the terrible disaster, he showed up at the Castle of the Two Cries accompanied by a phalanx of soldiers. He inquired if the Castle had sustained any damage and if any of us were injured. By right, no one may open the doors of the Castle without the permission of the Daiboku.

But the situation being what it was, the doors were opened and the General was allowed to enter.”

“And then?”

“As soon as he stepped inside the castle walls, General Jou—Asen—tried to slay the Hakuchi. But his sword passed right through the Hakuchi without touching it. Realizing this, he ordered my colleagues to bring him a pheasant, one of the birds used under for ritual purposes under the jurisdiction of the Palace Time Keeper. Surrounded by soldiers and threatened with their swords, my colleagues led them to the Time Keeper and returned with a pheasant. Then Asen killed it and cut off its feet. The bird was stuffed in a jar and buried in a hole.”

Nisei-shi covered his face with his hands. “They went so far as to murder all the officials there.” He’d just managed to escape, thanks to the damage caused by the meishoku. “I’d had a bad feeling since Asen came in. I’d heard rumors that His Highness got spooked by one of the generals and set out for Bun Province to escape a persistent assassin.”

“What about these rumors?”

“They’d been on my mind. That’s why I figured, when Asen showed up, there might be something to those bad feelings. So I stepped into the shadows and made myself as small as possible and looked for a way out. When things got really dicey, I ducked down amidst the rubble, found a hole and slipped through to the outside.”

Under the cover of the surrounding disorder and darkness, this young civil servant had returned to his quarters. Guards soon came after him but he was able to conceal himself beneath the floorboards. He heard the guards talking about how the bodies didn’t add up and one of them had probably escaped.

“I made it out of the castle by the skin of my teeth and hid in a wagon carrying dead bodies. I played dead and made it past the gates, then managed to crawl away while the wagon was being unloaded at the cemetery temple outside Kouki. I headed for Zui Province territory first, but spotted the air corps operating there and figured I’d better put distance between myself and Zui. I mingled with the refugees and fled here.”

He grasped Risai's hands as if clinging to her for dear life. "Please help me. Asen will kill me for sure."

Risai nodded. "Don't worry. I'll take care of it." She ordered an aide-de-camp to find himself a place to rest, making sure not to reveal his presence, and not talk about it to anybody else.

She prepared two communiqués. One she gave to an aide-de-camp and sent him to Kouki under the guise of requesting advice in subjugating the uprising. Contained therein was secret missive to be delivered only to the addressee, and which must not be allowed to fall into any other hands. The recipient of this communiqué was Haboku, in the Imperial Palace.

At the same time, she sent a second communiqué by messenger pigeon to Sougen in Bun Province.

*Asen was behind the coup d'etat.*

She disguised Nisei-shi among the camp followers and solemnly proceeded through Jou Province. Ten days later they were intercepted by the air cavalry adorned with insignia identifying them as troops under Asen's command. They bore an official-looking document bearing a garish red seal.

"We already know that you've been communicating covertly with Nisei-shi," the squadron captain stated. "And that in order to make the Hakuchi's foot your own, you broke into the Castle of the Two Cries and murdered the officials there." To which he added that she'd also assassinated Gyousou and Taiki. "General Ryuu is hereby ordered to return to the Imperial Palace. It'd be better if you didn't make things any worse for yourself by resisting."

She of course insisted that she didn't know him, but the captain obviously knew he was secreted somewhere in the camp. The young retainer was pulled out of the ranks and cut down without a word. "Don't interfere," the captain warned her, but Risai didn't doubt that she would meet the same fate en route to Kouki.

The air cavalry had her caged like a roosting chicken. Risai was only able to escape because they'd deigned to let her rid her kijuu, Hien. With Hien's help, she was barely able to get away. Risai had any number of old friends and associates in Jou Province she could turn to. Her immortality played a part as

well.

Risai had been an outlaw ever since.

She wanted to weep. There could be no worse slander than being labeled a traitor to her own kingdom. Her name muddied beyond reason, she sought cover wherever she could find it and survived day by day.

Many of her old friends believed her and sympathized with her plight. But others accused her, asking how she could commit such a crime. Worse, there were those who tried to turn her in. And a portion of those who didn't were tried for the crime of sheltering her, and as parties to "high treason" their corpses were strewn in the muck at the executioner's gate.

"For a year—more than a year—I did nothing every day but run and hide. While I was living as a vagrant, Asen consolidated his power and fortified the Imperial Palace. At length, it became clear to the people as well that Asen was a usurper. By then it was too late."

At the same time, Eishou and Gashin vanished from Bun Province. Many of Gyousou's subordinates dispersed across the kingdom and concealed themselves or were secretly murdered. Nobody knew what was going on inside the Imperial Palace. Those that stepped forward and criticized Asen were struck down or disappeared.

"Asen would not permit the slightest criticism of himself, or the slightest respect paid to His Highness. In Tetsui, where Asen had first conspired against His Highness, Asen's army razed every building and burned the city to the ground. He scoured I Province as well, surrounded His Highness's duchy of Saku County, and lay siege to it. I heard that over the subsequent winter, most of the residents there died."

Youko was aghast. "Asen hated the Imperial Tai that much?"

"Apparently so. I don't understand it myself. I have never seen personal animosity drive anybody so far and to such lengths. Although he kept it hidden, his loathing must have been deep. Furthermore, scorching the land, depopulating the villages and leaving them to the mercy of the winter—not only to the territories connected to His Highness, the lands of anyone who opposed Asen in any way met a similar fate."

"Just a minute." Having listened to Risai silently up to now, Shouryuu, the Imperial En, raised his voice. "He is destroying the realm. What rustler steals from his wealthy neighbor only to kill the cattle and let it rot in the fields?"

Risai nodded. "It seems that way to me too. It would make sense if Asen assassinated His Highness and usurped the throne in order to reign in his stead. However, that's not what it looks like now. It looks like Asen has no interest whatsoever in ruling Tai."

Risai did not believe he had risen up to plunder that which was Gyousou's out of bitterness. Nor did she believe the opposing theory for his motives. According to some rumors, one of the two "jewels in the crown" had become emperor and Asen was resentful at being made the subordinate. This theory struck her as too simplistic. That's why nobody had initially been suspicious of Asen. His motivations weren't that obvious.

Rather, Risai felt that Asen was acting out of a hatred for Tai itself. Asen appeared not to care in the slightest about the destruction of the kingdom he ostensibly ruled or the extinction of his supposed subjects. Consequently, no appeal to humanity could reach his ears.

"When there was a rebellion, Asen didn't attempt a strategic approach, selectively dispatching troops to suppress the revolt or staring down the opposition and waiting for something to develop, or anything like that. He'd send his whole army at them. Without a word of warning, he burned and pillaged the villages and slaughtered the inhabitants. He didn't even bother chasing down those trying to escape. If it happened again, he'd simply do the same thing again."

"But there's no way that such a kingdom could continue to exist."

"So you would think, but—"

Risai didn't understand how things had come to this state. Despite conducting himself in such a manner, Asen showed no signs of losing followers. Nor did she believe they were loyal to him simply out of fear.

Branded a traitor and constantly on the run, she scoured Tai in search of Gyousou. During that time, she intended to round up anybody who had any doubts about Asen or was inclined to oppose him and mount a rebellion. But

suspiciously, such efforts always fell apart at the last minute. There had to be turncoats among them sabotaging the cause.

Those who'd leveled their criticisms at Asen and raised their voices against his inhuman nature the day before would the next day suddenly become his ardent supporters. The same remarkable trend was observed among many of the nobles as well.

"One day the Province Lords had our backs and were supporting us, and the next day they were selling us out to Asen. To keep their positions, they caved into Asen as if the backbones had been plucked from their bodies. They averted their eyes as the sovereignty of their lands was violated and their subjects killed."

It was a *sickness*. That was the word bandied about. And what was happening did resemble a plague. Those infected lost the will to oppose Asen. No matter what the atrocity, they ceased to care. No matter what crimes were committed right before their eyes, they felt not a twinge of sympathy.

"It sounds like brainwashing," Youko muttered to herself. Using some sort of technique like that, the conquering forces had swept across Tai. In any case, it seemed that nothing could stop the traitors.

"The people of Tai do not have the means to save themselves," Risai gasped.

Youko hurriedly grasped her hand. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Risai replied firmly, but her voice was interrupted by ragged breaths. Dark shadows encircled her closed eyes.

"That'll be all for today. You need your rest."

Risai grasped Youko's hand, putting remarkable strength into her thin, worn fingers. "Please. Save Tai."

Youko squeezed her hand in turn. "I understand."

Koshou had withdrawn a short ways off. Summoned by Koukan, he rushed in. After telling them to wrap things up, Youko left the room with obvious reluctance.

She looked up at the faces of Shouryuu and Koukan. "I can't abandon them. I

won't."

"Youko," Shouryuu said in a low rebuke.

"You heard that, didn't you? How am I supposed to look the other way? What good is a ruler who just stands by and let these things happen?"

"Youko, that isn't the problem."

"Doesn't Heaven rule the World Below according to the Way? How can casting Tai aside be in keeping with the Way? You say that Heaven won't allow it, but is that really true? Where is this Heaven anyway? Who is this person saying what is and what isn't allowed?"

Tentei, the Lord God of the Sky, resided in Heaven and governed the actions of Divine Providence. Tentei appointed the ruler of each kingdom. But even in the midst of the ceremony, Youko had not seen Him or heard His voice. Told that He existed, believing that He existed, and accepting that the world existed according to His word, there was yet not a single person who had seen Tentei.

"If my job as an empress is to sit here and protect Kei and watch Tai go to the dogs, then you can take this throne and shove it."

With that declaration, Youko ran down the steps and into the courtyard.

## Chapter 22

[3-7] In a fury, Youko headed towards the interior of Kinpa Palace. For a while she aimlessly paced about. Passing through an isolated group of buildings, she found herself in a peaceful spot overlooking the Sea of Clouds.

The buildings of Kinpa Palace covered the rolling hills at the top of the mountain. Cutting across the castle courtyard and through a short tunnel in a rock wall, she had arrived in a small valley nestled between some deformed outcroppings of stone.

The valley ended at a promontory projecting into the Sea of Clouds. It was a small piece of land, decorated only by a few gazebos. Other than the flowers adorning the stems of the summer grass, there wasn't a whole lot else to look at.

Youko sighed to herself. The trees perched atop the soaring rock walls to her right and left cast their shadows down upon her. Nothing was here but the green smell and the salt scent of the ocean and the vista of the Sea of Clouds spreading out before her.

"I never knew there was a place like this—" Youko wondered out loud, sitting down on the grass.

She heard the cry of a bird and the roar of the ocean. She never imagined that there might be a place like this in Kinpa Palace. She had no use for most of the expansive architecture of the Imperial Palace and hadn't bothered finding out what else was there.

Youko rested her chin in her hands. "This isn't half bad." She had no idea where she was. And no real idea of how to find her way back.

It wasn't only the Imperial Palace. Little in this world was left unadorned, as nature intended. The walls and pillars were wildly decorated with colors and designs. Parks and gardens were no exception, with arbors and stones packed

into every available space.

This spot had somehow been overlooked by generations of rulers. There was nothing to do here but stare at the Sea of Clouds. The gazebos had about them a look of long neglect. The paint had worn off. But their appearance engendered a feeling of relaxed calm. It occurred to her again that she was a stranger in a strange land.

Having put her whole heart and mind into being empress, she hardly ever thought about the land of her birth. Now and then when the memories rose up in her mind, they felt like images from a dream. Whether she'd forgotten, or whether she had stored them away in a box, hearing about Taiki disturbed something inside her. A long-dormant nostalgia. She wouldn't call it longing, but when she thought about never returning, she felt a painful sense of loss.

A kirin from her same era, from her same neighborhood. What was he doing right now? That there'd been a shoku must mean he'd returned to that dream-like world. But why couldn't he come back again?

As she puzzled this over, she heard faint footsteps. Glancing over her shoulder she saw her chief retainer. "You found me soon enough, Keiki."

"I know where Her Highness is at all times. Koukan was looking for you."

"Oh."

"The Imperial En looked very displeased."

"No doubt."

"May I sit down?"

"Go head. What do you think, Keiki?"

"About what?"

"You're a benevolent creature. Do you think we should cast Tai aside?"

Keiki sat next to her and stared out at the Sea of Clouds for a long minute before he spoke. "The people of Tai are in a pitiful state."

Youko nodded. "We hear what chaos Tai is in, but things there are probably worse than we can imagine."

"Undoubtedly. If the throne was truly vacant, it would not take six years to be filled. Normally, it's rare for such terrible conditions to persist over six years. The chaos that preceded the Imperial Tai assuming the throne was not this out of the ordinary."

"Have you been to Kouki before?"

"Yes. Even shortly after the coronation, the disorder was relatively minor. That's how ably the provisional court had been conducted."

"Huh," muttered Youko. She looked at Keiki. "So, what kind of person is Taiki?"

"He is very small."

"Figures," Youko said with a smile. "Your very clear explanations are entirely opaque."

"Is that so?"

Youko laughed. "Well, it was seven years ago. From what I can tell, he's probably changed a lot since then."

"Yes," Keiki replied.

"If you were driven from the kingdom, Keiki, what would you do?"

"I would return."

"And under what conditions would you be unable to?"

"I cannot imagine. However young, Taiki understood the burdens that had been placed upon him. Of course, he found them daunting. But no matter what calamities might have separated him from Tai, he would do his utmost to return. I cannot fathom the circumstances under which the contrary would be true."

"I don't suppose it's possible the Imperial Tai is there with him?"

Keiki mulled it over. "I do not think so," he answered.

"Why not? If you believe he'd return if he wanted to, then maybe the only other option is that he doesn't want to. Perhaps he's lying low with the Imperial Tai."

"If the Imperial Tai was with Taiki, then they'd have no reason to conceal themselves. This is not a case of the Imperial Tai losing the faith of his subjects

and fleeing the kingdom. With the kirin beside him, no army would bar his way to the Imperial Palace.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Youko was lost in her thoughts for a moment. Keiki blurted out, “I do not think this involves anything so simple.”

“Why?”

“Because a meishoku was reported. A meishoku is a shoku brought about by the scream of a kirin.”

“A scream—”

Traveling back and forth between *here* and *there* required what was called the “Gogou Gate.” By accessing the supernatural powers of the Moon, a gate could be opened in the Moon’s shadow. But not everybody could do so. The magical gifts required to open the gate or their equivalent ability was necessary. Those qualified included the highest ranks of the mountain wizards, kirin, and their appointed youma.

However, the Gogou Gate naturally could not be opened in the middle of the day. It was also said that it couldn’t be opened in center of the Yellow Sea or above the Sea of Clouds.

“A meishoku does not rely on the power of the Moon. The kirin’s powers alone create a wrinkle in time and space. That alone makes this a grave matter. Despite occurring on a small scale, it is nonetheless a shoku. If it were to occur in a city, a great deal of damage would be inflicted in its vicinity. The kirin himself would likely not be left unaffected. Consequently, it is rarely done. I have never seen it done myself.”

“Huh.”

“Furthermore, I doubt that Taiki knows how to bring about a meishoku.”

“Could a kirin be in the dark about such things?”

“In Taiki’s case, he is a taika, born in Yamato and raised there until the age of ten. As a result, he is not well versed in the ways of the kirin.”

Youko tilted her head quizzically to the side.

"I'm not sure of how to phrase this. Using words to express the nature of the beast within is quite difficult. I haven't ever caused a meishoku, but I believe I have tried. Though I cannot concretely recall the memory, I have the feeling I grasped what a meishoku must be like: that it is a terrible thing and I should not proceed except under the most extreme circumstances. That is the essence of the raw sensations I felt."

"Wow."

"There are many other things of a similar nature. In our youths, we take on the form of the beast. We learn how to take on human form. We transform into the human and return to the beast. We learn to make the transition, but we cannot remember when or under what set of circumstance we did so. If pressed, I could only say: somehow and at some point in time."

"I guess it's like when a human child first learns to walk and talk."

"I think so too. Many kirin powers and abilities come to us when we know ourselves only as beasts. The meishoku is a case in point. I could not tell you when the knowledge came to me. Only that when it did, I recognized it for what it was. I am quite sure I attempted it when I was very young, to see what would happen. Like one day realizing that you have legs and running as hard as you can to see what those legs can do. But Taiki is a taika. He lived for ten years in Yamato before coming back, and he grew up the entire time in human form."

"He never spent any time as a beast?"

"Not that I know of. A kirin with no memory of himself as a beast would lose many of the powers that he should have as a kirin. When I met him on Mt. Hou, he couldn't transform, and he had not tamed any youma as his shirei. Nor do I believe he knew how to cause a meishoku. I think something happened and he did it instinctually. Something terrible happened to him. As long as he is engulfed in that maelstrom, Taiki cannot return."

"I see," said Youko. She remained mum for a minute. "Still, don't you think we should save Tai, Keiki?"

Keiki returned her look, and then averted his eyes. "Please do not ask me questions I have no business answering."

## Interlude

### Chapter 23

[3-8] The impurities were accumulating. The boy was not aware of them in the slightest. To be sure, only the beast within was being injured, not the surrounding “human” shell. And, of course, nobody else had the slightest idea what was going on. Their attention was drawn instead to something else entirely: the strange “accidents” that seemed to occur in his presence.

“This is the second time my son’s been injured playing with him,” the woman snapped at his mother. “Now he’s got a hairline fracture. Keep him away from my kid!”

His mother watched the woman march off and heaved a sigh.

“He fell down all by himself,” his brother charged. “He was chasing us and waving a stick and tripped over his own two feet and fell in the ditch.”

“Is that so?” their mother said mostly to herself.

“He’s always pulling stunts like that. Hiding our stuff, pushing us down, waiting for us on the way home and throwing things at us. He deserved what happened to him.”

“Oh, don’t say things like that.”

“Why? He’s the bully. Serves him right.”

“I said, no more,” his mother stated flatly.

His brother glared back at them both. “It’s *his* fault. Something happened when he got spirited away. He’s different. Everybody says he creeps them out. And *I’m* the one who pays for it.”

The boy hung his head. Because it was true.

At first, everybody was admiring and sympathetic, celebrating his return with great displays of affection. When that died away, only the strange looks remained. At length, he grew used to it. Next came the courteous isolation. He was labeled “strange.” And the other children in the neighborhood picked that up and tormented him with it. His brother was apt to get involved as well.

“It’s got nothing to do with me, but they all badmouth me as well, and push me around and throw stuff at me.”

The boy’s younger brother seemed on the verge of tears. He picked up a toy and threw it at him.

“Stop that right this minute!”

“Why are you always taking *his* side?” he shouted, as he continued to fire off whatever he could lay his hands on. His ammunition exhausted, he grabbed his older brother instead.

Or rather, he *tried* to grab him. Before he could actually do so, a piece of the shelving below the lintel in the genkan abruptly shook loose and fell on him. The plank of wood was not very heavy, and he managed to avoid a direct hit. His younger brother gaped, and then realizing the calamity that had almost befallen him, burst into loud wailing. His mother screamed as well and ran up to him and clasped him to her bosom. Coming to the realization that he had suffered no grievous wounds, she looked back at the elder of her two sons, her eyes filled with a confusion of wonder and fear.

Sanshi giggled rather maliciously.

*Sanshi*, came Gouran’s scolding voice out of nowhere. Sanshi pretended indifference. *That’s an evil little kid.* “We can’t allow any further harm to come to Taiki.”

Sanshi was only looking out for him. She had no choice but to tolerate them feeding him impure food. She didn’t understand this world very well. But what she’d grasped in her clouded, semiconscious state was that Taiki needed somebody to watch his back while he was in detention. His jailers were few, and they provided the barest minimum of security and little beyond the basics of life. Furthermore, from what Sanshi could see, his jailers weren’t aware that they were poisoning him.

"The enemy's agents could be anywhere."

They were cleverly manipulating his jailers. But who were *they*? She detected no overarching desire on their part to harm Taiki. Nor did they seem to hate him or behave with hostility toward him. Detaining Taiki like this, and conspiring to commit regicide, probably arose out of animosity toward Gyousou.

Strictly speaking, Taiki wasn't the enemy. In that case, the persecutions and unreasonableness of his jailers could be overlooked. However, when it came to others—

"Just a warning—that even though taken captive, Taiki is still a kirin."

She had only reached out ever so slightly with a hidden hand. Anything more would sap Taiki's psychic energy. Therefore a warning would have to suffice.

"I'm compromising as much as possible."

What Sanshi really wanted to do was take Taiki and flee. Aside from the emperor, there was no one on earth as exalted as the Taiho. No good could come from allowing him to be seized by these peasants, forced to live in these menial surrounding, abused by coarse language, not to mention the attempts to beat him.

The strain on her body and mind made it difficult to endure the humiliating behavior Taiki was being subjected to. If his jailers were the ones raising their hands to him, she had to pretend not to see anything. No matter how disrespectful, how abusive their behavior, she had to grit her teeth and take it. The same went for the contaminated food they were feeding him.

"I can't stand it—" So why does *Taiki* have to stand it too? "Why won't the Imperial Tai rescue him?" Sanshi muttered to herself.

From the shadowed golden darkness, she heard Gouran answering in similar tones, "If he lives—"

"Nonsense."

"But he was lured to Bun Province."

Sanshi pressed her hands to chest. Or would have in the real world. If that was true—if perchance the rebels had gotten to Gyousou—if he was already dead—

Then who would come to rescue Taiki? What would they do if this state of affairs simply continued on and on? As these thoughts occurred to her, Sanshi felt true fear for the first time.

Even though in small amounts, the poisons were accumulating. That dimming golden glow proved it. If this went on for many more years, what would become of Taiki?



## Part Four

### Chapter 24

[4-1] Risai awoke in the dead of night. When she opened her eyes, someone was sitting in the shadows at the side of her bed. Moonlight spilled through the doorway from the adjoining room. The sounds of cicada flowed through the windows.

"Your Highness?" said Risai.

The shadow raised her head and nodded. "Sorry. Did I awaken you?"

"Not at all," Risai murmured. "You know, everybody's been looking for you."

"Yes. I ran away and hid, you see."

"Ran away and hid?" Risai queried.

The Imperial Kei did not elaborate. The room once again fell into silence. The sounds of the night floated on the cool breezes. At length, the empress spoke again from the shadows.

"What kind of person is Taiki?"

Risai started a bit. Coming from her same home town, Taiki's existence must hold a special place in her heart.

"He's kind of small," Risai said.

Soft laughter answered from the cloaking darkness. "Keiki said the same thing. I told him such descriptions are not really helpful."

There was humor in her voice. Risai had to smile. "That's really what he's like. Small and innocent. Guileless in the extreme. Yet with enormous reservoirs of empathy."

"Then he certainly is a kirin."

"He does resemble Your Highness in some ways."

“Me?”

Risai nodded. “He’s very laid back. From the perspective of my class and rank, Taiki is a person of very high social status, and yet does not act that way in the slightest. Gyousou-sama says that Taiki is quite unaware of his social position. It’s not that he misuses his rank and authority, but rather that he pays it no mind. Your Highness seems to deport herself after a similar fashion. The first time I heard your ladies-in-waiting address you by your given name, I was quite taken aback. But then I thought, ah, the Taiho is like that too.”

“I see.” Risai sensed a wry smile on her shadowed face. “There’s no such thing as social class in Yamato. Well, no, it does exist, but more as a state of mind than anything else. My ladies in waiting, Suzu and Shoukei, are more my friends than my retainers. Surmounting class doesn’t seem something easily done here.”

“And the Daiboku? He addresses you informally as well.”

“Yes. I don’t know that I would call him a friend. More a colleague.”

“A colleague?”

“A colleague who helps me hold up the kingdom. Once upon a time, he was a member of a rebel gang.”

“A rebel—” said Risai dubiously.

The shadowed girl nodded with great air of sincerity. “Not long ago, there was a terrible governor in Kei. He ruled with an iron fist and exploited the people. I had only recently acceded to the throne and lacked the power to drive him from his seat of power. So instead I gave my support to Koshou. To strike down the governor, he chose compatriots from among the people—many who so feared the governor’s despotic rule that they recoiled from even criticizing him aloud—and together they spent many long months planning the revolt.”

Youko leaned forward. The moonlight illuminated the side of her face. She had a severe look on her face, as if steeling herself against a deeper pain. “I wonder if that sort of thing would be possible in Tai.”

Risai caught her breath. *So this was the subject she wished to broach.* “I don’t think that it is,” she said. Youko seemed on the verge of saying something further. Risai cut her off. “I understand what you are trying to say. If the people

were so inspired, there should be nothing to hold them back. I know how foolish it sounds—how much like an excuse it sounds—to say that such a thing is impossible. But I must insist that it is.”

Risai stared up at the ceiling. Though the summer night air filled the room, Risai felt a block of ice in her heart. Her ears had stopped ringing. Yet she could still hear that cold wind blowing through her.

“I escaped Asen’s clutches together with a few troops of my own. I later heard that they were caught and taken back to Kouki. Not only my soldiers, but the commanders serving with the other generals as well. Many civil servants fled from Asen’s presence. All of them ended up on the lam, accused of assassinating Gyousou-sama and Taiki, and plotting to usurp the throne.”

At first, Risai interpreted these turns of events in a straightforward manner. “The emperor and Saiho having died, and Asen offered himself forward as the man to take charge of the kingdom in their stead. But not everyone went along with his version of things. Doubts about Asen gradually mounted, and in time a significant number of people grew dissatisfied with his rule. While searching for Gyousou-sama, I gathered together those with similar sentiments and put together an anti-Asen coalition. But nothing good came of it. We were building castles out of sand. No matter how often we organized people together, there were always a suspiciously large number of defectors. Everything we built was doomed from the start.”

“I see.”

“The defectors either betrayed us to Asen or simply disappeared into the night. In time, the patriots were all silenced. We had already lost any safe havens where the volunteers could gather. Those who hadn’t been captured were forced deep underground to escape Asen’s clutches. Those who harbored any doubts about Asen understood that a moment’s carelessness would drag everybody around them into the maelstrom. If a rebel was known to be in a certain village, Asen would spare nothing to burn that town to cinders and salt the earth. Even now, there must be many people with opportunities to strike back at him. But it is next to impossible for them to seek each other out, to communicate and join forces.”

Risai paused and then said, “Your Highness must know about the harsh winters in Tai. Heaven has turned its back upon us. Disasters strike with increasing frequency. Youma flood the land. It takes everything they’ve got for the people merely to stay alive. The only question on their minds is how to survive the coming winter.”

It was said that the only reason anybody remained alive was because of the *kouji*. Having acceded to the throne and reorganized the Imperial Court, Gyousou took action even before delivering the Inaugural Rescript. The riboku upon which the kingdom was founded, known as the *roboku*, was located in the heart of the Imperial Palace. Gyousou made a request to the *roboku*, and Heaven granted him a plant called *keihaku*.

“Keihaku?”

“Yes. The *keihaku* is a plant like a brier. It grows freely in the harshest of environments, producing white flowers over a long growing season, from early spring until late fall. After shedding its flowers, it bears a large fruit the size of a quail’s egg. When this fruit is dried, it burns as well as charcoal.”

No one could survive the harsh winters in Tai without fuel. But charcoal was a limited resource, and the people required a supplemental source of energy. *Keihaku*, though, could be planted in the corners of fields. A rich harvest, dried and stored away, could tide things over until spring. A single person could prepare enough charcoal for a family, a great boon to the people of Tai.

“*Keihaku* originally only grew in the Yellow Sea. His Highness made the request to the *roboku* and obtained it for Tai as well. The spring His Highness disappeared, *keihaku* appeared on the *roboku*. Before three years had passed, white *keihaku* flowers could be seen in every nook and cranny around Sui Province. In the midst of this disastrous chain of events, the people were provided with the means to survive the winter. The people came to call it the *kouji*, meaning the gift of the emperor who lives in Kouki.”

“I understand,” Youko murmured in a sad voice.

“If Asen truly was emperor, he would have exhausted the Mandate of Heaven by now. But he isn’t emperor. If he was but a mere usurper, his lifespan would be limited. But he is a wizard as well. As long as nobody can eliminate or overthrow

him, the only people who can take his wizard status from him are the emperor, or if the emperor no longer lives, then the seal of the Hakuchi. Neither the emperor nor Taiho have died, but nobody knows where they are. Consequently, Providence will not stir itself to remove this treachery from our midst."

"And that is why you say the people of Tai don't have the means to save themselves."

"Yes," Risai nodded. At the same time, she caught sight of Youko, attending sincerely to her every word, and her heart ached in her chest. *Please help us*, she wanted to say. *Please search for Gyousou. Please search for Taki. And strike down Asen—*

Risai was about to speak when Youko said softly, "If the Imperial Tai is safe, I wonder if he would share the kouji with us? Kei is impoverished—" She gazed up at the moon. "It gets quite cold in the north of Kei during the winter. The villagers are particularly poor there, where few valuable crops can be grown. There isn't a good substitute for charcoal in the winter. This land does not get as cold as Tai, so those in the north are poorly provisioned against the winter. The walls are thin, and the windows aren't glazed. There never seem to be enough down or furs. Or rather, nothing else of equal weight that can take their place. The people of the north drape themselves in cotton, and huddle together until spring."

"Oh," Risai said simply.

"Of course, charcoal by itself doesn't make the sole difference between living and dying. In the dead of winter, they can venture into the countryside and harvest wild tubers. The winters in Kei are not so fierce as to bring people to the brink of death. I can't talk of the winters in Tai in the same breath. But I wish to lessen their suffering."

"Of course."

"I've heard that though the former emperor of Tai exhausted the storehouses, he left the government in fair condition. Keiki says that the provisional court was ruled with a similar degree of competence. Kei was quite the opposite. The misrule of the former empress has been replaced by an empress frankly not that much better. The bounties of the land have yet to accumulate. During the reign

of the former empress, the ministers turned to tyranny and oppressed the people. Like that governor I told you about. The evil-doers ran rampant and still have not all been purged. Furthermore, after the former empress died, a pretender arose and laid waste to the Kingdom. Kei has only begun to resurrect itself. Right now, those citizens residing in the cities have yet to experience the good times they deserve. A country like Kei that is constantly in chaos will know nothing but poverty.”

“Yes,” Risai said.

“I feel sorry for all of them—” Youko spoke in low, strained tones, a quaver in her voice. “And I feel sorry for the people of Tai. Tai is in even worse straits than Kei. More than the severity of the seasons, the natural disasters and the oppressive rule of the pretender must make for suffering I cannot imagine. The pretender must be eliminated and the rightful emperor and Taiho restored to the capital. I—”

Risai reached out with her remaining hand and grasped the hand of the Imperial Kei. “And beyond that, what? You cannot mobilize your troops. The Imperial Kei cannot command her soldiers to breach the borders of another Kingdom. It is a sin that would surely destroy Kei.”

“Risai.”

“Please forgive me. I was so caught up in my feelings for Tai that I contemplated unpardonable sins. But you cannot do this. You are the Empress of Kei. You cannot pity the people of Tai at the expense of your own subjects.”

*Kaei, you were right.* And yet she sensed great strength in the hand holding hers.

“I will not let Tai go by the wayside. I will do whatever I can do. I intend to press the Imperial En to do whatever he can. However, if the task ahead should exceed my abilities, please understand. I cannot ask the people of Kei, who have not yet experienced a happy era of their own, to resign themselves to another era of chaos.”

Risai smiled. “Your reassurances are more than enough.”

In her heart she wanted to plead: *Don’t abandon us.* But she couldn’t. The

person before her was the Empress of Kei. Risai could not do anything that might take her away from her own people.

# Chapter 25

[4-2] When Youko left the anteroom adjoining Risai's bedroom, she observed three silhouettes in the promenade facing the inner courtyard. One big, one small, one in-between.

"What are you guys doing here?"

The one closest sprang to her feet like a marionette whose string had been given a hard yank. "Youko, what were you and Risai talking about in there? You didn't really—"

"Shoukei, what are you doing at this time of night?"

"Suzu called me. We've been looking for you high and low. The word was that you showed up, ordered everybody out, and went into her room. What were you discussing? You didn't promise her anything—"

"I did."

Shoukei audibly caught her breath. Sitting at her feet, Suzu only hung her head.

"Don't you understand what that means?"

"Sure. That's why I promised I would do as much as I could and no more."

Shoukei heaved a big sigh and sat down on the spot. "Don't do that! You just about gave me a heart attack."

Suzu gave Shoukei a surprised look. "I *told* you Youko wouldn't do anything stupid like abandon Kei."

"Did I really look like I wasn't playing with a full deck? C'mon." Youko grinned and punched Shoukei playfully on the shoulder. Such prevarications aside, she was glad they hadn't called out the cavalry and barged into the bedroom.

"And what say you, Koshou?"

In response to Youko's inquiry, the big man made a good attempt at curling into a little ball. "I'm, um, just doing my job as your bodyguard."

Youko smiled. "In that case, let's head back. I've been running around in circles all day. All that paperwork won't take care of itself. Suzu, sorry, but could you stay and look after Risai?"

"No problem," Suzu said with a wave of her hand. "Leave he to me."

Youko smiled and returned with Shoukei and Koshou to the promenade. By now, the arbor had collected two more silhouettes. Youko stopped and demanded, "And would it do any good asking what you two are doing here as well?"

The two odd-sized shadows exchanged glances. "Naw," said Enho. "Just taking in the beautiful Moon. That's all." He looked at Koukan.

"I was looking for Your Highness. I was getting a bit frazzled, so I asked the Taishi to accompany me."

"But of course," said Youko, surveying the four of them. "You have nothing to worry about. Risai told me herself that I was not to be dispatching soldiers to Tai. Even knowing that, there really was no other way to ask for help. I have pledged to do whatever I can, as long as it does not exceed the limits of what is possible. Risai says that is something she can live with."

Enho and Koukan nodded, clearly relieved.

"Which is why I wish to ask the Taishi and Chousai to explore everything they can think off—within the limitations placed upon us by Heaven—that might done for the good of Tai. Make it a priority and report back to me as soon as possible."

The next day, the officials involved with the matter held a high-level conference. They worked straight through the night until morning, but failed to come up with a definitive solution of any sort.

"Taking Your Highness's example as a precedent would suggest escorting the Imperial Tai to Kei. This becomes the premise for taking any further action." Koukan spoke in the same cool and collected manner as he always did, though he did look a little haggard. "However, it does not appear that the Imperial Tai

has escaped from Tai. If he was able to leave Tai, he would likely seek sanctuary elsewhere, and news of such efforts would reach our ears. Lacking such evidence, we must conclude that he remains within the borders of Tai."

"There's no way of making sure?" asked Youko. She glanced at the assembled officials gathered in the Sekisui-dai.

"The Phoenix is the fastest way to make such inquiries among the other kingdoms," said Shouryuu, the Imperial En. "But there's no way of knowing for certain whether the Imperial Tai will formally ask for asylum. If he seeks shelter among his retainers, former colleagues, and acquaintances who escaped Tai, our inquiries are not likely to reveal that fact."

Koukan nodded. "If he sought sanctuary, I think it would be in En. En is the closest of the great kingdoms and its shores face Tai across the Kyokai. Moreover, the Imperial Tai and Imperial En have a cordial relationship and have exchanged diplomats. If he seeks asylum in any kingdom, it will be En."

"I see."

"One thing the ministers can agree upon is unlikelihood of the Imperial Tai seeking refuge among former acquaintances in other kingdoms. The Imperial Tai is a man of the sword. Furthermore, six years have passed since the last change of government. We cannot believe that a general of such repute would be so afraid of Asen that he would hide himself away for six long years. Neither would he content himself to sup from another's plate, even that of a dear friend."

"No, he would not. And if he did seek refuge among old acquaintances, he would surely feel compelled to spread the word around so that the people of Tai could gather to him."

"That he would. The logical conclusion is that the Imperial Tai is still in Tai. However, seeing that Risai-dono is unaware of his location, the possibility remains that he may have been captured, or he is biding his time, waiting for the opportunity to strike back. The odds of the former are high. In any case, in order to extend asylum to the Imperial Tai, it would first be necessary to travel to Tai and search him out. And that would likely encroach upon the Divine Decrees."

After a few moments of thought, Youko said, "If a search was the only thing involved, we wouldn't need an army. Say that I—or somebody appointed by me

—entered Tai, accompanied by the bare minimum number of soldiers. If it was a personal visit, how would it be different from the trips Keiki has made there previously? It's natural for me to travel with an armed guard, and discovering that the Imperial Tai was absent, we would then set off to try and find him.”

Koukan glanced at Youko. “The opinion has been expressed that Heaven might turn a blind eye to such contrivances, but besides the enormous uncertainties involved, the worst case scenario would be disastrous to Kei. The ministers are unanimous in the opinion that this is not a viable solution. I'd like to explain what they did come up with in the *possible* category.”

One of the kirin there let out a long, exasperated sigh. The other kirin laughed out loud. With a patient smile Youko said, “Okay, for the time being, let's hear what you have to offer in the *possible* category.”

“If a way can be found, what about the Tai Taiho? According to Risai-dono's testimony, a meishoku occurred at the same time that the Taiho disappeared. In that case, we venture that the Taiho would have been swept away to Yamato or China. Searching for the Taiho would not present the same problems as searching for the Imperial Tai. The question remains of how such a search would be organized.”

“What question?”

“First of all, only a person capable of traveling to Yamato could engage in the search. And only a person holding the rank of count, whose name is listed on the Registry of Wizards. More importantly, from what I've gathered speaking with Your Highness, whether Yamato or China, these are not places where searchers can be dispatched in great numbers to poke around willy-nilly.”

“You are right about that.”

As she pondered this conundrum, Rokuta spoke up. “A large-scale search would be impossible. We might as well forget about it from the start.”

“Yeah, it would be difficult.”

“The difficulty of the search itself is hardly the whole of it. We might be able to scrape together enough wizards with a rank of count or above, but those who aren't taika would have a hard time of it over there.”

Youko blinked. Rokuta grinned and said, “In short, Yamato’s a stranger place than any of them could believe in their wildest dreams. *Here* and *there* were never meant to mingle together. Only a shoku allows people to come and ranka to go. For the most part, the kaikyaku are swept here from the east, from Yamato. Language aside, the kaikyaku look the same as the rest of us. Even those who don’t rarely strike us as *foreign*. Wouldn’t you say? Simply put, it comes down to the way the people who come from *there* to *here* look.”

“Yeah. That definitely is true.”

“So I don’t think it’d be such a big deal if someone *here* got swept away to *over there*. But the fact is, excepting those among us who possess rather particular characteristics, ordinary people *can’t* go *there*. Only ranka. Only people in their unformed state.”

“Unformed state?”

“Yes. Alive, yet without form. Nobody travels from here to there in other than a prenatal state. There are exceptions, but those are the rules that the two worlds abide by. Otherwise, it’s a one-way trip.”

“But Keiki came to Yamato to get me.”

“Indeed. Kirin can cross over. Wizards above the rank of count can too, those whose names are listed in the Registry of Wizards. In actual practice, though, I think it better to stipulate that only taika listed upon the Registry of Wizards can pop over there in the bodies they possess. When Keiki came to fetch you, how’d it go?”

Keiki nodded in response to Rokuta’s question. “As the En Taiho has observed, I did so in a *warped* state.”

“A warped state?” asked Youko.

“Before traveling to Yamato in search of Your Highness, I consulted with the En Taiho. He told me that I had to put myself into a *warped* state. I didn’t really understand what he was talking about at the time, but I did once I put the plan into action. Without a doubt, I could not travel to Yamato in concrete form as myself.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

"It is hard to put these concepts into words. It was so that I wouldn't be visible to the people of Yamato. And even when observed, seen as if through a clouded glass. As if they were seeing something completely different. When people did see me clearly, they wouldn't hear me or understood what I said. Or in other circumstances, they would only hear my voice. Maintaining the human form was difficult and full of uncertainty. I might suddenly revert to my animal form, or dissolve into the ley lines in the Earth. Just as when I am in this world, I could only be assured of maintaining my form when I was in the presence of Your Highness."

"Really?" Youko queried in surprise.

Keiki nodded. "*Over there* is definitely not where we are meant to be. It is almost as that world constantly repels us from its presence."

Rokuta agreed. "It is very difficult for those who are not taika to maintain a concrete existence there, except as spirits or ghosts. They cannot maintain a firm hold on their physical bodies over long periods of time. And if they can maintain their physical shells, it is with great uncertainty. They become like shadows. This applies to emperors as well as kirin. And counts and wizards suffer even worse effects. Furthermore, the people *there* know nothing of the world *here*. A whole bunch of non-corporeal being showing up over there would cause a bit of a ruckus."

"I see."

"Moreover, even if they were to force their way through, they don't know what Taiki looks like. Risai could certainly sketch a resemblance, but six years have passed. He's a taika, which means his appearance would have changed as well."

Youko puzzled over this information. "How I looked definitely changed when I came here. What happens when you go back?"

"Don't you be going back," Rokuta said bluntly. "Taika are born in that other world from a woman's womb. When they are born, they are covered with a shell resembling that of their parents, called the *taikaku*. When a taika returns here, he reverts to his God-given form. In the case of the kirin, our hair takes on this golden hue."

"Yeah, that makes sense. You wouldn't likely be born blond over there."

"Yes. I don't understand all the reasons, but it feels like wearing a reversible coat. When you go back to Yamato, you take on the form you had there. So you'd think that when I went back, I'd turn into the skeleton of a tottering old man. That doesn't happen. When we stop growing older here, our taikaku seems to stop aging as well. While things don't match up exactly, I'm fairly confident they'll fall into the same general category."

"So even if you brought Risai with you, there's no guarantee she would recognize Taiki?"

"Pretty much so. Except that a kirin's aura can be comprehended. Taiki was swept away to Yamato while still an egg. I'm the one who found him there."

"Enki?"

"Yeah. I was on an excursion. Or rather, I was there to scout things out. And I felt the aura of a kirin. I notified Mt. Hou, and they arranged for a rendezvous."

"But that means you can search for a kirin?"

"I can. Except when I say I sense the aura, that means that first we both must be in the same general vicinity. And what's worse, back then, we knew from wake left behind by the shoku that he was in Yamato. But it still took ten years. This time around, we don't know whether he's in Yamato or China. He could have swept away to either. Even with Keiki helping me, it could easily take years."

"What about a dozen of you?" Youko casually asked, but her question was met with stunned silence. "Well, I guess there are kingdoms with vacant thrones, so it's not like we could come up with all twelve— What? Did I say something funny?"

Shouryuu sighed. "Youko, we don't interfere in the internal affairs of other kingdoms. That is a long-established tradition. Each kingdom deals with its own problems in its own way. They don't seek the assistance of other kingdoms, and don't seek their cooperation in such causes."

"But the Imperial En gave me a helping hand when I needed it."

"That's because I'm also a taika and a known eccentric."

"And he loves sticking his nose in where it doesn't belong," Rokuta chimed in.

"I'm telling you the way things are. Officials don't get together in the name of mutual cooperation. Even if once in a while a kingdom requests aid from another, such things are always carried out in purely diplomatic terms. We have no allies, only interests. This is a world where, except out of need, even neighbors avoid forging international relations."

"So even with twelve kingdoms, nobody ever forms some sort of United Nations and does anything together?"

"History suggests no precedents."

"Because it's expressly not allowed, like not invading another kingdom?"

"Hmm." Rokuta and Shouryuu exchanged glances. "It's never been confirmed one way or another. The subject itself is so extraordinary it simply hasn't ever come up before."

"No doubt."

"But there's probably isn't any other way. The Imperial Tai cannot escape his own kingdom. No such rumors have come to our attention. Taiki most likely has been swept away and cannot venture back under his own power. We know this simply because he has not yet returned. In the absence of both the Imperial Tai and Taiki, what can the people of Tai hope for? Even if there are more people like Risai, organizing the people and raising an army has become impossible, has it not? Tai cannot save itself. That's why the other kingdoms must lend a hand. If we don't have enough kirin, then we must ask the other kingdoms for help."

Youko paused and said, "In the first place, weren't any eyebrows raised when Tai announced a change in government? The Phoenix never sang, and yet a new emperor was enthroned. No matter how you look at it, that was just wrong. Didn't anybody bother to see for themselves what was going on, or confirm all the rumors?"

"Naturally, we were—" Shouryuu said, but Rokuta interrupted. "At first, formal emissaries and informal observers were sent to Tai, but were not allowed to enter Kouki. Having no vantage point from which to observe, they adopted a

wait-and-see stance. Since then, things have been pretty much left to their own devices. I, for one, have repeatedly urged that conditions in Tai be investigated, and ways be found to offer assistance.”

“But, of course,” Youko said with a faint smile. “So far as the other kingdoms are concerned, they’re screwed, right?”

Everybody in the room collectively drew their breath. “Your Highness—” scolded Keiki in a small voice.

Koukan and Enho seemed frozen with surprise. Shouryuu drew his brows into something of a scowl. “I think that was uncalled for.”

“But it’s the truth, isn’t it? We stand around watching from the sidelines. Sooner or later the ranka of the new Tai kirin begins to grow. Everything goes back to square one. And in En, nobody’s feathers get ruffled.”

“Yeah, that’s about it,” Rokuta answered before Shouryuu could interject.

“Rokuta.”

“This custom of not intervening in the internal affairs of other kingdoms is, when you get right down to it, nothing more than an excuse. The fact is, in Youko’s case, you went around sticking your fingers into every pie in the kitchen. You just haven’t found a good reason to get involved. Because the Imperial Tai and Taiki aren’t around, they can’t petition you personally. I dare say, you haven’t been trying hard enough to find a good reason, and that’s because of that little moat called the Kyokai separating En and Tai.”

Shouryuu was on the verge of answering when Rokuta waved his arms wildly. “Don’t give me any more of your lame excuses. At the end of the day, you’re worried about the refugees. Refugees flowing in from other kingdoms stir too many pots in En. That’s why you keep an eye on Kei and Ryuu and track any developments there, and lend a hand if you can. But there’s the Kyokai between En and Tai. Not many refugees make it across the Kyokai to En. Compared to Kei, it’s almost nothing. Little harm will come to En by standing by and doing nothing.”

“You mean because it’s not in En’s national interest.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.”

"I'm the Emperor of En," Shouryuu said roughly. "So of course I act in En's national interest. You fault me for that? That is the only reason I exist."

Rokuta glanced at Youko, as if seeking out moral support. "That's about the best you can expect out of a guy like him. Even if you're the only one with her shoulder to the wheel, I'll throw my weight behind your efforts. One way or another, I want to get the little pipsqueak back here."

"The little pipsqueak."

"He really was small. And so timid. But not without his charms. I've met him on several occasions. If he is suffering wherever he is right now, I want to help."

"And I'll do whatever I can."

Shouryuu pounded his fist on the table. "Kei herself still hovers on the edge of chaos. Should the Imperial Kei be dividing her efforts for the sake of other kingdoms? You're traipsing down the garden path."

"It's the fellowship of the taika. I can't abandon them."

"And as a fellow taika, let me warn you. This is not the time for you to be setting off on such adventures."

"But is En going to act?"

Shouryuu seemed momentarily at a loss for words. "Who do you think I am, first and foremost? I am the servant of En. It's not my job to fix the problems of other kingdoms! En has no end of problems of her own. Are you telling me, the Emperor of En, to put everything on hold and run off and help Tai?"

Youko looked at Rokuta. "Enki, whatever you've got I'm willing to give it a try. The rejuvenation of Kei may be delayed somewhat, but whatever refugees cross the border into En, I believe the good-hearted Imperial En will take care of them."

"Youko!"

"Oh, and that reminds me. I think it'd be better to have a contingent of the Imperial Guard organize the refugees in wagon trains and safely escort them to the En border."



"That's a good idea."

"The debtor wouldn't be trying to out-bluff the debtee, would she?" objected Shouryuu.

"The same goes for you too," Youko said with a wry smile. "En is the only one of the northern kingdoms that enjoys both wealth and stability. Whenever anything happens in this hemisphere, even if the people stay where they are, they turn to En for help. If Tai goes to the dogs, it's a sure bet that, before long, the entire population will grab anything that floats and head for En. The youma and the Kyokai may stand in their way, but that will soon be their only option."

Youko looked down at her hands. There was no avoiding the fact of how small her hands were.

"Kei is hardly in the position to be looking after the affairs of other kingdoms. We have yet to restore our own fortunes. Even after we turn the corner, you could seize us by the ankles and shake us upside down and we still wouldn't have any spare change to share. But I can't stand by while Tai wastes away. The fate that awaits the people of Tai is the same one that awaits the people of Kei."

"The people of Kei?"

"Nobody lives forever. Nobody reigns forever. I intend to restore Kei to her rightful place. But I can't know for certain if I'll be able to accomplish that goal. There's no guarantee I won't stray from the Way before I can make it happen. And when I'm gone, what becomes of my people? Everything comes down to how we treat Tai now."

Youko turned to her retainers: Keiki, Koukan, and Enho. "I'm sure you are asking yourselves: here we are treading water and yet we throw our remaining life vests to Tai? I'm fully aware of these feelings. Yet I also feel that I must save Tai. I will do what I can. And not only for the people of Tai. For the people of Kei as well. Against the possibility that the same thing will ever happen to Kei."

"Your Highness—" Keiki raised a warning voice but Youko shook her head.

"Of course, I have no intent of straying from the Way. I do want to be the best empress I can be. But all the wishing in the world won't necessarily make it so. I don't think any ruler sets out to ruin his kingdom on purpose. And some, like Tai,

were brought low by insurrection and revolt. That's why I want to lay down some precedents in preparation for the day that I perish, or stray from the Way. I want to shore up the levees against the day the floods will come so my people will have refuge even without an empress."

With that, Youko said to the startled Shouryuu and Rokuta, "I know that every ounce of energy I expend on Tai delays the resuscitation of my own kingdom. The people may become impatient and wish to shake the dust of Kei from their feet. And I can do nothing to stop those who say En is a better place than Kei and choose to emigrate there. Kou has already begun to crumble. Those in the northern quarter of Kou will of course turn to En for help. Asking En to bear the burdens of Kou, Kei and Tai all by herself is asking too much."

*You see, Youko said to herself, have thought this thing through.*

"But that is not now the current reality. Kei will grow less chaotic, we will produce our own surpluses in time. What I'm saying is, once we become that kind of kingdom, I want to think about the ways we can help the refugees from other kingdoms. The people flee their kingdoms because their kingdoms are in chaos. I mean, rather than supporting their homelands out of sheer necessity, they should be proactively assisted. And even when people have not fled their kingdom, policies should be in place so that they can endure until the next emperor is enthroned."

"Youko—"

"What I'm saying is, there should be some sort of goodwill warehouse. A food bank in each region. In the case of famine or the ravages of war, these warehouses can be opened to assist those in need. Ideally, they would be located between the kingdoms. If a kingdom could not bear the burden, the other kingdoms would consolidate their surpluses and when a refugee problem presented itself, open up those warehouses."

She continued, "I've only thought this through in general terms, but witnessing Risai's flight to Kei, I believe that somewhere, somehow, the establishment of such institutions is necessary. Risai coming here to plead on behalf of her kingdom convinces me that the other kingdoms should be available to intercede and open their warehouses. I didn't know about these sins with instantaneous

punishments or about these customs of non-intervention. So maybe I'm approaching the subject too simple-mindedly."

"Youko," Rokuta said, half in amazement, "you sure do come up with some interesting ideas."

"Well, it's not really my idea. It's something people in that other world thought up. It didn't exist when you were living there."

"Huh."

Youko said to Shouryuu, "If nobody's done it before, then I want to give it a shot. See how it flies. Can we petition the other kingdoms and ask for their assistance?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"I'd be happy to try, but as the new girl on the block, I don't think the other rulers will give me so much as a backward glance."

Shouryuu mulled things over for a while. Finally he said, "Everybody's so eager to put us up on this pedestal as the *great power*. Now it's Tai. Not long ago it was Kei. And now that Kei is finding her feet, Kou is crumbling. To make matters worse, storm clouds are gathering over Ryuu as well. One after the other, En's neighbors have succumbed, falling against us like so many dominoes. I'm not omnipotent, you know. Our storehouses are not inexhaustible. And you want me to shoulder this as well?"

Rokuta turned to the exasperated Shouryuu with a surprised look. "What's this? You never noticed before what's going on here?"

"What?"

Rokuta grinned. "It's because you're the Angel of Death."

Shouryuu frowned at him fiercely. "I'm making my best effort, working as hard as I can, and this is the thanks I get? All right, we'll search for Taiki. I might as well be the one leading the charge."

"Thank you." Youko smiled broadly and bowed her head. "Sometime in the future I promise to repay all the debts I have amassed."

"I should be the one stating the terms."

"But of course," Youko laughed. "For as long as the Imperial En shall live, and until the day En itself descends into chaos, I promise to make Kei all that Kei can be. Set you mind at ease. You can trust me on this."

# Chapter 26

[4-3] Around dinnertime, Youko went to see Risai and inform her that they'd decided to look for Taiki.

"I don't know how much help we'll be able to expect from the other kingdoms, or what kind of search we can mount for Taiki until we actually start sounding them out. For the time being, it's a small step. But at least we're moving forward."

Risai couldn't find the words to express her gratitude. Youko gave her a smile and hurried out of the parlor. Whatever time she was devoting to Tai would have to be made up by burning the midnight oil.

"I don't know how to thank her," Risai said to herself.

"It's great, isn't it?" a voice called out. Keikei came into the parlor to tend to his "butler" duties. "If they can get the other rulers from the other kingdoms to pitch in, we'll find him for sure."

"Yes. For sure," echoed Suzu.

Risai could only nod in amazement. Compared to the six years she had battled constantly with despair, with no sign of redemption in sight, new vistas were opening before her eyes.

*The salvation of Tai had begun.* Such was the joy in her heart that she couldn't fall asleep that night. Lying on her bed, turning Youko's words over in her mind, her joy turned to anxiety halfway through the night.

What if they couldn't find Taiki, despite their efforts? The strong possibility that they would was deeply reassuring. Yet those feelings just as easily turned to hopelessness, and then to fear. It wasn't that she doubted Youko in the slightest. Her life had, for far too long, turned in directions not of her choosing. Her expectations had been dashed, her hopes ruined. And she knew of nothing that

would suggest otherwise this time around.

How likely was the happy promise of Taiki returning unharmed? Even if he managed to be found, no end of harm could befall him in the meantime.

Once she started thinking along those lines, her worries made sleep impossible.

Unable to bear the pain bearing down on her chest, with a great deal of effort, Risai struggled out of bed. Her condition had improved enough that Suzu no longer kept an all-night vigil by her bedside, and retired to her own quarters. Suzu wouldn't be there to assist her, but neither would she be there to castigate her for leaving her bed.

Risai made her way along, using the walls and furniture to support her infirmed body, and finally found her way to the doors of the room. She'd only wanted to let in a little night air, but exhausted she sat down on the spot. Being reminded of the disabled state of her body irritated her to no end.

Even when Taiki was brought back, what would they do then?

Using Taiki's "imperial sense," they could launch a search for Gyousou. But to do that, Taiki would have to return to Tai. Could she do something like that? With such a weak constitution and no ability to wield a sword? She'd be incapable of defending Taiki. Youma and brigands rampaged across Tai. Perhaps her heart was no stronger than her body. Perhaps she'd fled Tai and sought safety within the walls of the Kei Imperial Palace in pursuit of physical and mental relief. Casting a backward glance at the place from which she'd come, Tai was a roiling hell. She could not imagine taking Taiki there.

Risai sat on the promenade and leaned against the wall with an air of melancholy. Beyond the eaves, moonlight shone down on the courtyard. She heard the lonely trill of a cicada from somewhere in the darkness.

She didn't know what they would do after Taiki returned. She wasn't sure he would return, or that they could save Tai. She'd held onto these beliefs without reason, at some point having become far too accustomed to steeling her heart against failure and disappointment.

It was like heaven and hell had allied themselves against Tai. How many years

had passed since Gyousou had disappeared? The *Koushi* ceremony was said to bring reason and order to the world. Had Asen performed the Koushi, and could there be reason and order in the world if the true emperor did not perform the ceremony?

In any case, the chaos in Tai had been underway ever since the throne had been vacated.

Several summers after losing Gyousou, Risai's search had brought her to Bun Province. Secretly, in order to escape discovery by Asen, relying on intermediaries and seeking asylum from old and trusted friends, she headed towards Tetsui. Gyousou had previously vanished from a camp in Rin'u.

Rin'u had originally been the only city in Bun Province that was home to a gemstone fountain. The oldest gemstone fountain was in Mt. Kan'you, and fountains of varying sizes spotted the landscape around it. "Company towns" were located hither and yon at the base of the mines. Though most of them had played out, news of the occasional active fountain was still heard. Even those mines had suddenly run dry. Risai couldn't say whether they too had been touched by the widening gyre of anarchy.

She found little of substance in the neighborhoods of Rin'u. The people of Tetsui would probably know more about Gyousou's whereabouts. She even harbored the hope that they might be hiding him. But when she arrived there, she found the city burned to the ground. Only the charred rubble remained. Tetsui had been abandoned. Not a breath of human life among the scarred remains. Only the shrine altar had been spared, and atop it, an offering of white keihaku flowers.

The citizens of Tetsui who remained must have come here, under cover of darkness, to pray for Gyousou's safe return.

Next to the shrine, the withered riboku, scorched by the flames, stood alone forlorn and dejected. The desolate sight impressed upon Risai that, like it or not, Tai was a kingdom whose center could no longer hold. Falling apart was the only option it had left.

Risai as well had to mingle with the shadows of the night, avoiding human contact, and hiding herself from sight. She crept along the streets, looking for

anybody who might knew where Gyousou was, or Eikyou or Gashin or the locations of their forces. She met with little success.

She learned that there'd been a pitched battle outside Rin'u between local rebels and the Imperial Guard, and that subsequently the Imperial Guard had grown skittish and unable to respond in force to further rebel attacks. That battle probably occurred around the time Gyousou disappeared.

It would not be that unusual for an emperor to get struck down amidst the fog of war. But not an emperor like Gyousou. Gyousou was renowned as a swordsman. No one was reckless enough to take him on in a fair fight. Except that he was leading Asen's army. Gyousou had trusted Asen and Asen's underlings. And at the height of the battle, they would be the ones watching his back. They could have overwhelmed him with superior numbers, or captured and restrained him. But did Gyousou really trust Asen that much? Considering that Gyousou had divided Asen's forces, perhaps he'd doubted Asen from the start.

She spent the summer walking through the battlefields and the ruins. And then the summer ended and snow began to fall. Perhaps because of the soot, it was a gray snow, a harbinger of worse times to come. The winter that year was particularly harsh. The snow piled up in great drifts. Though built to withstand the elements, many of the houses in these parts collapsed under the weight.

At the end of the cold, snowy winter came a dry summer. Rarely had Tai seen such a hot summer. The farmland lay parched beneath the sun. And when winter came again—

She believed it was the following year when youma began to appear in greater numbers. For a kingdom without an emperor, this was hardly out of the ordinary. But they multiplied practically in front of her eyes. The old-timers said that youma would never appear while the true emperor reigned. People began stating with greater conviction that Gyousou must be dead.

Risai stared into the night sky above the courtyard. How were the people faring now? Here she was, while Tai suffered all manner of privations. The summer was drawing to an end. Another terrible winter waited in the wings.

*Please save us.* Even now, she could not shed the desire to cry out and cling to the empress. The more she got to know the Imperial Kei, and the more she knew

about the people around her, the deeper the grievous nature of the sinful action she demanded seeped into her soul. And despite knowing that—

“There is no other way.”

Somebody must rise up and bring a halt to Asen’s villainy. Lacking a leader with the power to subjugate the youma and bless the land with bounty sufficient to last the winters, Tai could not last many more years longer. This year, or the next, or the year after—it hardly mattered now—the snows would melt away in the spring to reveal the frozen body of the last citizen of Tai.

“What are you doing here?” a voice queried behind her.

Risai glanced over her shoulder. An old man was standing at the gate to the courtyard. “Nothing,” she replied.

The old man was Enho, the Taishi. This was his manor house. It might well be nothing out of the ordinary to him, but since she’d been moved here, he had stopped by to see her on a fairly regular basis. The empress’s entourage was few in number but they were all good-hearted. Whenever she thought about Youko in these terms, she grew fearful even of herself.

“Are you all right? Being up and about at this hour?”

“More or less, I guess.”

Enho approached her and sat down on the steps leading up to the promenade where Risai was seated. “It seems that the Imperial En will be lending a hand in the search for the Tai Taiho.”

“Y-yes.”

“And yet you appear quite disheartened.”

*You don’t say,* Risai thought to herself, but couldn’t repeat this to Enho

“Indeed. We are faced not simply with the matter of finding him. And supposing that we do, a mountain of tasks lay ahead of us. Once the Taiho has returned, searching for the Imperial Tai becomes that much easier. Yet, it would then become necessary that the Taiho return to Tai, and doing so might very well risk losing the Taiho as well.”

“Yes.” Risai nodded.

"In order to effect a successful search for the Imperial Tai, a large contingent would be necessary. However, I've heard that assembling such a number of allies is well-nigh impossible. And even if they can somehow be found, while the search for the Imperial Tai is underway, the people will continue to bear the unbearable."

"Winter is coming. Not many months remain until the first snowfall."

"When you think about it in those terms, Tai is a hard country. You cannot survive the winter in the open air."

"It's true. Winters in Kei must be quite temperate."

"Compared to Tai."

Risai nodded dejectedly. "There are temperate kingdoms and kingdoms that are not. I have to wonder how much better off Tai would be if it shared Kei's climate—if people huddling together and sharing the warmth of their bodies was enough to make it through the winter. Why must there be both warm kingdoms and cold kingdoms in this world?"

"Why, indeed."

Risai looked up at the Moon. "Why did Tentei create a kingdom such as Tai? It would be enough if only people could depend on the warmth of their own bodies to survive the winter."

"Asking such questions does not change what is."

"But—" Risai said, biting her lip. "Didn't Tentei create the world? Then why did Tentei create such a place as Tai? With such merciless winters? If I was Tentei, I would have at least created kingdoms with more pleasant climates. The winters not too cold, the summers not too dry. A world like that."

"Huh," was Enho's only response.

"If the people were starving, I would send them manna. When a cruel pretender rose up, I would strike him down. Why isn't Heaven more like that?"

"It does make you wonder."

"But why? It's said that the right to rule their kingdoms is granted by Heaven to emperors according to the Way of Compassion. If so, then why would it be a

sin to dispatch soldiers also in the name of compassion? It was Heaven that sat Gyousou-sama on the throne. Didn't Tentei make Gyousou-sama emperor and promote him to the throne? So why doesn't Heaven protect him?"

Enho didn't answer.

"Does Tentei really exist? If He exists, then why won't He save Tai? Why won't he listen to the prayer of the Tai people, even as they drown in their own blood? Are you saying that their prayers somehow aren't enough? Or perhaps that Heaven wishes Tai to be destroyed?"

"Risai-dono—"

"If Tentei doesn't exist, that's fine too. A God who doesn't deign to save his own creations has no business existing. But if there is no God, then why can't the soldiers of one kingdom trespass the borders of another? Who is it punishing that sin? If some person is making those judgments and passing those sentences, they why doesn't that same person pass that same sentence upon Asen?"

Enho warmly covered her cold, quivering hand with his own. "I understand how you feel. You musn't allow your passions to sap your own strength."

Risai took a deep breath and let it out. "I'm sorry. I got myself into a bit of a tizzy there."

"I do understand where you're coming from. After all is said and done, we are left to live out our lives under the Providence of Heaven. For as long as that holds true, we are condemned to this irrational state, the logic of which we cannot control."

"Yes."

"However, this is the world of men and women. Pay no mind to the business of Heaven. Instead, find a way to live within whatever Providence dictates. That is the end to which the Imperial Kei is devoting her heart and mind."

"Yes. I apologize."

"You need not worry about it. Nobody is casting Tai aside."

Risai nodded. The cruel light of the Moon shone down on the World Below.

# Chapter 27

[4-4] Rokuta sauntered into the Seishin. “Yo,” he said to Youko.

He and Shouryuu had returned to En only ten days before.

“Another visit out of the blue.” *You didn’t seem to have any problems finding your way here,* she didn’t need to add.

Rokuta grinned. “Well, I’ve been here before. Anyway, my hair mostly does the talking for me. Nobody has to ask who I am. Except that I don’t seem to have gotten through to that man of yours at the front gate. Gaishi was it? I’d appreciate you clueing him in for me.”

Youko sighed. “You do have a habit of popping in without much notice.”

“Hey, I consider that a virtue. Speaking of which, you need to get packed and ready to go. Snap, snap.”

“Ready to go?”

“Sure. I’ve been doing diplomacy. Kyou, Han, Sai, Ren, and Sou are on board. Including En and Kei, that comes to seven kingdoms. Hou and Kou currently have vacant thrones so I didn’t include them. And Ryuu and Shun didn’t respond favorably.”

Youko rose from her chair. “Five more kingdoms.”

“At any rate, we’ll do what we can with the help we’ve got and send search parties to China and Yamato. Sou is on good relations with Kyou and Sai. They’ll take on China. We, together with Han and Ren, will handle Yamato. We’re arranging for the Taiho from Han and Ren to come to En. As far as Kei’s role is concerned, I didn’t think it advisable to lay any more burdens on the Kei national treasury. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No problem. En is perfectly equipped for the job.”

"All right then," Rokuta grinned. "Despite this being on such short order, we can count an august official from Ren among our number. He's currently arranging his schedule, but considering the long distance he has to come, he's likely to be delayed a bit. In the meantime, there's someplace we need to go."

"Go? Where to?"

"Mt. Hou," Rokuta replied.

"Mt. Hou?"

Mt. Hou was located in the Yellow Sea in the very middle of the world, the holy place where the kirin were born. Youko had only been there once. Shortly after ascending to the throne, she traveled there to receive her Divine Dispensation.

"What are we supposed to accomplish on Mt. Hou?" Youko wondered aloud.

"We're going there to meet the Mistress."

"The Mistress? You mean Hekika Genkun?"

Hekika Genkun was the Mistress of the wizardesses who lived on Mt. Hou. Youko had never met her.

"Yes. In any case, what we're setting out to do has never been done before. We've got a lot to learn. Shouryuu told me to bring you along, seeing as you're the one who dreamed up this plan. We'll be flying there by kijuu, so pack light. The sooner the better. I want to get back before the guests start arriving."

Youko hurriedly got ready to leave, leaving everything else in Koukan's hands. She borrowed a shirei from Keiki. She was all set to depart from the Forbidden Gate, but Rokuta laughed at the proposition. "There's no telling how long it'd take going via the low road. It's a lot quicker flying above the Sea of Clouds."

Youko blinked in surprise. As with of the Ryou'un Mountains, the peak of Mt. Hou projected above the Sea of Clouds. However, except for an unattended shrine, she seemed to recall that the peak of Mt. Hou was unoccupied. It didn't look like anybody resided there.

"Well, you'll understand once you see for yourself."

With that, Youko climbed onto Hankyo and they took off. After a day and night astride the kijuu, she drowsily awakened to the sight of the Adamantine

Mountains rising from the sea in the early morning light like an island atoll. The day was approaching sunset when she recognized the outlines of the Gozan (the Five Mountains).

Mt. Hou was the eastern peak of the Gozan. A magnificent white temple palace stood at its peak. As they alighted before the gate, Youko recognized the figure of the person standing there. The luxuriantly-arrayed woman looked up at the hovering kijuu.

"You see?" Rokuta grinned.

But of course. *You'll see her once we get there*, he should have said. Youko had never seen Hekika Genkun before, but from the poise and appearance of the person awaiting them, she concluded that this was her.

"I am, as always, grateful that you could arrange to meet us here," Rokuta called out as soon as he set down.

The woman laughed and answered in a bright voice, "It is I who should be saying that to you. May the Taiho and his always unexpected visits remain unchanged until the end of time."

"I just can't help being who I am. I brought someone with me I'd like you to meet, Genkun."

Almost as if on Rokuta's cue, the woman's clear gaze turned to Youko. "This would be the Imperial Kei, then."

Youko started a bit. "You know who I am?"

"Well, I do happen to be the Mistress of Mt. Hou," Gyokuyou answered with a cheerful smile.

"Once we've gotten the introductions over with, there's some stuff we need to talk about, pronto. And if we could grab a little shut-eye along the way, that would be appreciated too."

Gyokuyou smiled and pressed Rokuta on towards the temple palace. Beyond the door-less gate was a broad courtyard paved with white stone. No surrounding wall or promenade, only a small, red shrine in one corner. It faced the Seiden, but Gyokuyou didn't head in that direction. Instead, she stood in

front of the shrine. She rapped once on the shrine doors with her fan and opened them. The last time Youko had been here, the doors opened onto a crystal staircase. But now the descending stairs were white.

Rokuta returned her surprised look with an wry smile. “Hey, don’t worry about it. She’s something of a supernatural being herself.”

Gyokuyou laughed cheerfully and urged the two of them on.

The entranceway seemed to serve the same purpose as the Forbidden Gate. The white staircase continued on for a relatively short distance, taking them to a similarly white structure. Stepping onto the floor and glancing backwards, the shrine doors were nowhere to be seen. Instead there was a white wall. The several other sides of the octagonal building were open to the world, revealing the bare stone ridges covered with green lichen.

“This way.”

Gyokuyou led them to a nearby palace. When they entered the spacious building, nestled within an outcropping of deformed rocks, tea and a light repast were waiting for them. The wizardesses said to reside in Hourou Palace were nowhere to be seen.

“I excused our other residents for the time being. Is this to your satisfaction?”

Rokuta said, “I’m always impressed by your generous hospitality. I’ll pose this question to you directly. Are you here at Mt. Hou aware of the current situation in Tai?”

“We have received repeated inquiries from En as to the existence of a new Taika, and have only concluded that the disposition of Taiki remains undetermined.”

“Anything else?”

“The throne of the Imperial Tai appears to be empty.”

“That’s the whole of it. A pretender sits upon the Tai throne. The Imperial Tai and Taiki are nowhere to be found. The Imperial Tai doesn’t seem to have left Tai, so his fate is beyond our control. That’s why we’ve decided to look for Taiki. It seems very likely that Taiki was swept away to the other world by a meishoku.”

Gyokuyou said nothing as she filled the teacups with hot water.

"This is too much for us to handle alone. We are asking the other kingdoms to pitch in and help. We hope to find Taiki and return him to this world. But simply taking him back to Tai would hardly be the end of things. Tai must lay away stores and prepare for the coming winter. Taiki would require allies and backers in order to escape the eye of the pretender and resume the search for the Imperial Tai."

"There is no precedent for the kingdoms reaching beyond their mutual self-interest to tackle a problem together."

"Do you think this offends Divine Law?"

"Hard to say. I see nothing wrong with seeking out Taiki and returning him to this world. I am concerned with what happens next. That may well offend Divine Law." Gyokuyou replaced the cover on the tea cup and offered it to Rokuta. "Moreover, that Taiki has not returned since he was swept away tells me that he is unable to at the present time. We don't know what condition he is in. If these circumstances, and the reasons for them, can't be addressed, then the difficulty of removing those obstacles remains."

"Indeed. And what would you advise?"

"Hmm—" Gyokuyou sank into silence. A long moment later, she nodded. "In any case, this is a pitiful state for Taiki to remain in. Let me look into this further."

"If you wouldn't mind," said Rokuta.

Gyokuyou stood up. "Grab a wizardess and make yourself at home in any of the palaces. I'll see you again tomorrow at noon."

# Chapter 28

[4-5] Youko watched Gyokuyou leave. She gave Rokuta a troubled look. “What exactly just happened here?”

“Exactly what it looks like. This incident lacks for precedents. Nobody is exactly sure how to proceed. So she’s going to confer about it.”

*I got that much.* But Youko kept these thoughts to herself. She felt quite unenlightened and yet didn’t know how to express the feeling.

“What kind of person is this Genkun?”

“Pretty much what you saw. She’s the Mistress of Mt. Hou. The one who keeps the wizardesses in line.”

“So having met with her, what happens next?”

“She’ll give us an answer. That’s why we came here, right?”

“Why would she know the answer?”

“Ah.” Rokuta sighed. “But of course. It’s the whole ball of wax you’re after.” He fixed his gaze on her. “In this world, Divine Providence is fixed and inalterable.”

“Yeah, I know, but—”

“Yeah, you know, but you don’t *really* know, right? This isn’t one of those things. This world is defined by boundaries of Divine Providence.”

Youko answered with a quizzical look.

“The Divine Providence of Heaven is taken as a given by the people. Or rather, the absolute nature of its logic is imposed on them. And nobody can change it.”

“I still don’t get—” Youko started to say.

Rokuta waved his hand, cutting her off mid-sentence. “Okay, okay. Let me give

you an example. And I'll make it simple. Right now, there stands in our way a sin of the most immediate nature. The armed forces of one kingdom may not trespass the borders of another. This dictate constrains us in our attempts to save Tai. In fact, there is in our past the precedent of the Imperial Army of a kingdom crossing an international boundary. Namely the Jun Tei incident."

He continued, "Jun Tei sent his Imperial Army into Han. As a result, both Jun Tei and Sairin were struck down almost at once. That day, there appeared to be nothing particularly wrong with Jun Tei at all. He went about his business as usual. But exiting the Outer Palace, he suddenly grabbed his chest and fell down the stairs. Alarmed, the ministers rushed over to him. A small river of blood was flowing out of his flesh and over the cobblestones. They tried to help him up, but found that his body had turned into a sponge, and any pressure only squeezed out more blood. He soon expired."

"You can't be serious—"

"It was even worse for Sairin. When the ministers ran back to the place to inform Sairin of the calamity that had befallen Jun Tei, they found only her remains left behind. Her shirei had completely devoured her."

Rokuta scowled and folded his hands on top of the table. "These were definitely not normal ways to die. No one had ever seen an emperor die in such a fashion. No one had seen a kirin's shirei attack him in such a manner. Consuming the kirin is the special privilege of the shirei, but they simply don't run wild without regard to the circumstances. The body of every kirin, when he breathes his last for whatever reason, is placed in a coffin and born to the Imperial Mausoleum to lie in state. While there, the hall in which the coffin resides is sealed. When the mourning period has ended, the coffin is removed, but during that time it will have been emptied of its contents. That's pretty much how it works."

Youko raised her hand to the base of her throat. Hearing the fate of the kirin from a kirin himself made her chest hurt.

"Something very unusual had occurred. Furthermore, Jin Tei had committed no sin to account for such a fall. He was a righteous emperor who held fast to the Way. No one objected when he dispatched the Imperial Army to Han. He

certainly hadn't sent the Imperial Army to Han to torment its citizens. He was an emperor whose deep compassion extended to other kingdoms. He mobilized his troops in order to save the people of Han. He had the support of the ministers and his subjects. No one criticized this action. Nevertheless, such was the fate of both Juntei and Sairin. When they both died without forewarning, all the customary procedures went out the window. Clearly, these were no ordinary deaths, but at first nobody made the connection between them and the mobilization of the Imperial Army."

"Did Enki and Jun Tei—?"

"We never crossed paths. Jun Tei ruled long before my time, though it is said that he and the Imperial Sou had met."

"The Imperial Sou—"

"It seems that briefly after the coronation of the Imperial Sou, Jun Tei had generously offered Sou foreign aid. And then he was suddenly struck down. When the Imperial Sou ascended to the throne, Sai had enjoyed a three hundred year reign under the most enlightened monarch of the south."

Enki swirled his tea and stared into the cup. "Nobody understood why Jun Tei had to die. After that, a new emperor ascended to the throne. It was then that they realized that the impression on the Imperial Seal had changed, and thus concluded Jun Tei must have committed a grievous sin. There was a precedent in this case. The kokushi of Tai had changed once before, from *Tai* (meaning *generation*) to *Tai* (meaning *peaceful calm*). The triggering event was said to be an emperor who strayed from the Way. His kirin subsequently died, and in order to prevent the next kirin from being born, he invaded Mt. Hou, slaughtered the wizardesses, and set fire to the *Shashinboku*. There are cases where the kokushi has changed as the result of the crimes committed by the emperor. This was the first time it was understood that Jun Tei had been called to account for sending his troops across an international border."

"That bad a crime—"

"That bad a crime. Borders cannot be trespassed, even for the most humanitarian of reasons. Not for any reason at all. Only then were the implications of this precept fully understood."

"Wait a minute. Who exactly laid down that precept? Tentei?"

"Who's to say? All we know is that the precept exists. The only thing written in the Divine Decrees is that one kingdom may not invade another under the force of arms. This sentence was without a doubt a transcription of the will of Heaven. These precepts exist in the world. Go against them, commit a sin, and the punishment is sure."

"But who knew that what Jun Tei was doing was a sin? Who delivered the punishment? There's gotta be somebody up there, right?"

"Not necessarily. When the emperor and Saiho are enthroned, they climb those stairs. The same ones you climbed. And by doing so, they receive the Divine Unction. That which they did not know before was newly written upon their minds. Or you could say that the essence of those precepts was imbued within their bodies. Turning against the precepts of Heaven would seem to activate a previously-instilled punishment. Think in terms of the body itself being conditioned for a specific response, like there was an angel perched on Jun Tei's shoulder judging the rightness and wrongness of his actions. There's no need for any *person* to be handing down the sentence."

"What about the Imperial Seal?"

"You could think of the Seal being imbued with those qualities in the same way."

"But don't you end up with the same problem anyway? If everything gets imbued with these qualities, then who does the imbuing?"

"Who indeed?" Rokuta stared up at the ceiling. "I'd have to say that Tentei does the imbuing. But the fact is, nobody knows anybody who's actually met Him."

Youko nodded. "Me neither."

"Nobody knows whether Tentei exists or not. Except that His precepts certainly exist here in the world, enveloping the world like a net. If they are transgressed, a punishment is guaranteed. Moreover, the circumstances are not taken into account. The problem with Jun Tei was not the purity of his intent, or rightness or wrongness of his actions. All that mattered in the end was whether

his actions touched upon the Divine Decrees. The rest was automatic.”

Youko shivered. A cold chill crawled down her spine.

“One proof of that is when we helped you. Simply examining our actions, then it sure looks like Shouryuu sent the Imperial Army across an international border. No matter how you look at it, this would seem to be a sin of the most immediate nature. To be sure, you came to En, but you didn’t come to En with the express purpose of seeking our help. You didn’t ask us to help you so you could strike down the pretender. You came to En because you had no place else to turn to and you needed asylum. Those were sufficient grounds to us. We persuaded you of the necessity of retrieving Keiki from the clutches of the pretender. You took command of the En Imperial Army, but for appearances only. Believe me, we were quite aware that what we were doing was not substantively different than what Jun Tei did. But the precepts are not balanced on such distinctions. As long as the Imperial Kei was in En, as long as the *letter* of the law was fulfilled, then no punishment was forthcoming.”

“But don’t you find that rather strange?”

“It is strange. Like a loophole that a lawyer of low character would come up with. The Divine Decrees definitely prohibit invading another kingdom under force of arms. But nothing says a rightful ruler can’t *borrow* the forces of a neighboring kingdom. At the same time, if this is something the Imperial Kei wishes—if the Imperial Kei herself is at the vanguard—then it surely can’t be called an invasion. However unbelievable it might be, this passes muster.”

“It is unbelievable.”

“It does no good to debate what is *good* and what is *bad*. This world must be accepted for the way it is. Explaining exactly *why* things are the way they are may tax our facilities. To tell the truth, you weren’t the first to make use of our armed forces in such a manner. It had come to our attention that the precepts of Heaven operate in an extremely dogmatic manner, and we concluded that with the proper emperor in the saddle, we would not brush up against the law. Still, we were pretty much on pins and needles the first time we put the theory into action. We had our own doubts about doing an end run around God, as it were.”

"So you threw caution to the wind and watched what happened?"

"Don't be silly." Rokuta scowled. "We weren't going to take a gamble like that. So like we're doing now, we turned to Genkun for advice."

"To Genkun—"

"Yeah. The Mistress of Mt. Hou. According to some, *Oufujin*, the guardian deity of Mt. Hou runs the show. But I happen to know for a fact that it's Genkun who's in charge of the wizardesses. She wasn't born here but she was brought up here. So who do you think appoints the wizardesses here to be wizardesses in the first place?"

"Well, that'd be Genkun, wouldn't it? It wouldn't be the emperors or empresses."

"You're exactly right. The wizardesses of Mt. Hou are called Wizards of the Air. The rulers of the kingdoms don't appoint them. They, in turn, don't serve any emperor or empress. Moreover, the wizardesses of Mt. Hou won't be found on the census of any kingdom. They reside in a world apart from any head of state. They are separately recorded on the Registry of Wizards and serve Genkun."

"Doesn't that mean that there's a thirteenth kingdom then? Genkun's position would seem on a par with an empress."

"Yes, it does seem that way. Except that this is clearly not a kingdom. Its distinguished citizens notwithstanding, there are no subjects. Besides, there are no kirin here to rein in the ruler. Genkun really can't be said to govern Mt. Hou. Nothing that could be called a *government* exists on Mt. Hou."

"Then what exactly is this place?"

"A part of Heaven. I'm pretty sure that's what it is."

"Heaven—"

"That's the only thing that makes sense to me. Houro Palace exists only for the kirin. The kirin are raised here and sent into the world. And the kirin exist to create new emperors. Moreover, somebody unaffiliated with any kingdom, whose authority exists independently in its own right, must belong to Heaven."

"But as for Genkun?"

"Hard to say," Rokuta said with a sigh. "You can ask her straight out if she's the one who appoints the wizardesses. But she's not the kind of deferential being who'll give you an unequivocal answer. If it's not her, there must somebody above her with the power to appoint the wizardesses. Maybe the Oufujin. Or somebody else. Either way, that's who Genkun ultimately serves. In other words, there's an organization called Heaven. At one end of the organizational chart are the wizardesses and Genkun is in charge of them."

"An organization called Heaven—"

"I think there is a world of the gods. According to the legends, Tentei resides in Gyokkei, where he reigns over the other gods and keeps the world shipshape. If there really is a Gyokkei, I wouldn't be surprised. My information is limited, though, and I've yet to meet anybody who's on a first-name basis with a god. While I've heard what the myths and tales have to say, it seems that the gods don't care to hang around with the likes of us. There's no way to seek one out and ask for an interview."

Rokuta paused and said, "However, here alone are the gods in constant contact with the mortal world. Genkun definitely has the ability to inquire into the intentions of Heaven. I don't know how she goes about doing so, but in any case she is our point of contact. The only person who can peer through the windows of Heaven is Genkun."

# Chapter 29

[4-6] As promised, Gyokuyou's pronouncement came the next day at noon: "The kingdoms uniting to search for Taiki does not violate any of the precepts of Heaven."

"So it's all right, then?"

"However, no one *not* listed upon the Registry of Gods or Registry of Wizards at the rank of count or above may cross the Kyokai. This rule is inviolable."

"As I suspected. But that does leave us short-handed. Although the rule of law is defined in the Divine Decrees, nothing there prohibits the creation of new ranks. Could new counts may be appointed for this purpose?"

"It does not. Rank equal to or exceeding that of count are, even from the perspective of Heaven, dispensational in nature, and are therefore accorded special rights and privileges. Those who may be so appointed are, according to established rule, the closest relatives of the emperor, the Chousai, and the members of the Sankou. All others should be thought of as unsuitable to receive such dispensations."

Rokuta clucked his tongue. "How about borrowing some of the wizardesses?"

"I have been informed that that is not permissible. The wizardesses of Mt. Hou cannot leave here without my permission. In this instance, I cannot grant that permission. Sending them forth from here to China or Yamato would require opening the Gogou Gate and thus triggering a great number of shoku. The Kouka is currently growing on Mt. Hou. We cannot permit the possibility of a shoku spreading across Mt. Hou and sweeping away the Kouka. The wizardesses must protect the Kouka above all else."

"Oh. Yes, indeed. A shoku."

"This is not a divine precept but a personal request that I am making. I wish to

keep the shoku to the bare minimum. Even if the Gogou Gate is opened on the other side of the Kyokai, there is no guessing how it might spread. Such is the nature of shoku. Thus I ask you to please act with all due restraint.”

“Will do,” said Rokuta, and Youko nodded.

Gyokuyou smiled. “However, a kingdom cannot be deprived of both its emperor and its province lords. According to the Divine Decrees, if there is no emperor, then all of the province lords are required to maintain a quorum. Even when there is an emperor, of the eight provinces aside from the capital, at least four or more must be present to constitute a quorum. This is one of the precepts of Heaven. Let me explain what I mean. Even temporarily, no more than four province lords can leave a kingdom at any one time.”

Rokuta gave Gyokuyou a hard look. “That’s the first time I’ve heard of such a thing. If that’s the case, it should be written down.”

Gyokuyou smiled nonchalantly in return. “If you’ve got a problem with that, tell it to Tentei.”

“This is why there’s no guestimating when it comes to the precepts of Heaven. Well, fine. Anything else?”

“Even given the consent of all the kingdoms, invading another kingdom under force of arms is prohibited. There are no exceptions. Without the acquiescence of the Imperial Tai, troops cannot be dispatched to Tai.”

“Understood. What about dispatching troops as observers only?”

“The precepts state that invasion is prohibited. But that does not mean that posting troops to another kingdom is prohibited in all cases. For example, when an emperor visits another kingdom, a contingent of soldiers will accompany him as bodyguards. No precept expressly prohibits this. Also, none prohibits the posting of a diplomatic staff consisting of nothing but military officers. In fact, this would seem to take place on a rather frequent basis. The problem is not with the entry of military officers into another kingdom, but under what pretext, and whether this could be construed as an invasion.”

“That’s splitting a lot of hairs.”

“In the case of Tai, the hairs get even finer. The question is what exactly would

be construed as an *invasion*. For example, engaging in actions contrary to the national policy of that kingdom's emperor. This Jun Tei did do. The Imperial Han was oppressing his people. Although contrary to the Way, it was the national policy of the then-rightful emperor of Han. Jun Tei sought to obstruct this policy. Thus his intervention was construed as an invasion. In the case of a vacated throne, the policy of the provisional court holds sway. In short, the policy of a provisional court *is* the national policy. However—”

“The Imperial Tai is not dead. The throne is not truly vacated.”

“Yes. But even in the case of a provisional court led by a pretender, interfering with the decisions of the court would constitute an invasion. Except that the rightful emperor is still in Tai. A pretender typically deceives the court and claims to be the rightful emperor. In the case of Tai, the acting head of state could not be rightly called a pretender. There is no precedent for this type of situation, so there's some uncertainty as what he should be called.”

“So there's a question whether Asen's Imperial Court would be so deemed by Heaven—”

“That's what it comes down to. This alone is without precedent. There are no established precepts governing it. Not even I could say how those dice would roll. But you would do well to bear in mind that national policy is not so much imperial policy as it is the policy of the current Imperial Court.”

“That does complicate things.”

“Battle lines are not allowed. Not a single square foot may be subtracted from a kingdom's divinely-recognized land. The people of Tai or the emperor of Tai cannot allow the occupation of their inviolable lands by another kingdom. No matter what the reasoning, you must understand that as soon as battle lines are drawn and troops quartered, you are touching upon a sin of a most immediate nature.”

“Understood.”

Enki posed two or three more questions, but it seemed to Youko more a matter of drawing bright lines around vague precepts. She was left with an uneasy feeling. Gyokuyou elucidated the Divine Decrees, taking precedence into consideration with her answers. In every case, it seemed that the precepts

trumped all and the legalistic interpretation of the precepts trumped all.

Youko was left with the impression that Gyokuyou had somehow or another spent the previous night researching interpretations and precedents concerning the precepts. But exactly what were these precepts?

Since being brought to this world, she had pretty much accepted it as it was. A world where magical beings called youma rampaged about. A world where wizards performed miracles. A world filled with the strange and the fantastic. She accepted it all the same way a child accepts fairy tales at face value. Except this world was something quite different from such idyllic dream worlds.

Why youma existed—why emperors lived such long lives—why children were born from trees—how it was that the kirin went about choosing a ruler—everything that should be a complete mystery she'd come to treat as "normal."

That was the kind of uncanny feeling she was stuck with. She couldn't put it into words, and it stayed with her as they left Houro Palace. Climbing the white staircase to the top of the mountain, she struggled to articulate what she was feeling but remained at a loss.

"Did you understand what Genkun was telling us?" Rokuta asked. When Youko nodded he added, "I'm going on to Sou to fill them in. It was about time I dropped by and said hello, anyway. Why don't you head back and wait for word from Shouryuu?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Later," Rokuta said with a casual wave. He climbed onto his suugu and flew away to the south and disappeared from view.

## Interlude

### Chapter 30

[4-7] Two and then three years passed. The impurities accumulated, steadily eating away at him. The dusky golden hue of his shadow grew darker and darker.

And, thought Sanshi cynically, it seemed that the more polluted his shadow became, the easier things got for them. Slipping away from Taiki's shadow had once been quite difficult. Now it was becoming surprisingly easy. Perhaps they were drawing energy from the pollution itself. Or perhaps this was proof that the shell enclosing them was growing thinner and more brittle.

Or perhaps—and as she examined the state of her own being, the thought send chills down her spine—the impurities gathering within Taiki's shadow came not only from without but also from within.

Sanshi drove away all those who tried to harm Taiki. And every time she sensed the golden glow corroding and dimming. As far as she was concerned, she didn't have a choice.

She was his foster mother, born from the golden fruit at the same time and destined to share the entirety of his life with him. When the end of his days arrived so would hers. Such was the extent to which she lived her life through him. Taiki chose the emperor and then descended from the place of his birth to become the Saiho. Even though no longer the child that Sanshi had raised, she lived to serve him as she always had.

Gouran was no different. To be sure, Gouran had not been born for Taiki's sake. But the covenant that bound them was as true as that binding Taiki and Sanshi. The covenant between kirin and shirei was on a par with that between emperor and kirin. So not only Sanshi, but Gouran as well existed to protect and serve Taiki.

How long could they stand by silently and watch injury pile upon injury? According to Taiki's command, or for the emperor whom Taiki served with all his heart and soul, they could endure and even approve of the stripes he suffered. But no such reasons were forthcoming.

Only a warning at first. Those who showed him any disrespect had to understand that a price must be paid. But the incivilities did not cease. Sanshi had no choice but to impress upon them what a grievous mistake it was to take Taiki for granted. The realities of their situation compelled her and Gouran to condone his imprisonment and the abuse of his jailers.

That did not mean he had lost any of his dignity or divinity.

In particular, attempts to compound his injuries with malice aforethought were deserving of death. The law notwithstanding, injuring the Saiho was a capital offense. There were *no* mitigating circumstances.

Remove one threat and there were more malcontents where that one came from. They came, it seemed, out of the woodwork. Every time they disposed of one, their patience and forbearance ran thinner. With every contest, the malice of his persecutors increased and Sanshi and Gouran sensed the golden hues of Taiki's shadow growing muddier.

The muddier it became, the weaker the psychic streams became.

Even if this was in part the fault of Sanshi and Gouran, she didn't know how else to deal with the threats. *How long must it continue?*

If there was one thing that rescued her at all from the depths of despair, it was the joy that Taiki evinced when, spurred by one impetus or another, she reached out to touch and console. Unfortunately, Taiki remembered nothing about Sanshi or Mt. Hou or Tai. And yet he had not forgotten the touch of her hand.

*I am always with you. I am always by your side.*

Whenever she comforted him, a small ray of light brightened the darkness, and Sanshi felt, however slightly, that her efforts were being rewarded.

"I shall protect you, come what may," she whispered.

Within the gloom, though, she was gradually losing form. Sanshi was not

aware of this herself—that she was slowly losing control of herself. Her thoughts constricted and hardened. In such a state, it did not occur to her that the impurities were attaching to herself as well.

And neither was she aware of what was happening to herself and to Taiki.

To be sure, Taiki had noticed the many “accidents” happening around him, but put them down to echoes from the wrinkle in time that had brought him to this here and now.

For as long as he could remember, he’d suspected there was something “off” about him. He was conscious of the strange feeling—the knowledge, even—that the existence of a strange creature like himself meant his environment must be somehow amiss. He sensed that he was a disappointment to those around him, a bewildering burden.

Those feelings grew year by year, blossoming into a conviction.

He really was an alien here, a source of unease to his surrounding. A bad seed. The rift in time and space that at some point had cut him free from this world grew so deep that he could no longer turn his eyes from its reality.

There came the point that, despite all her efforts, his mother could no longer bridge the widening divide between them.

He was cast adrift. He understood the necessity of his isolation. Calamities struck those connected to him. He was rumored to be cursed, rumors that became attached to his character. He had no choice but to accept that he was a dangerous element, a mark of bad luck wherever he went.

And he accepted this with an almost uncanny sense of resignation.

He did wonder now and then where these feelings sprang from. When he was small, being the odd child out was very painful and disheartening. However, now the fact struck him as neither painful nor disheartening.

Perhaps because of that comforting presence. At some point he’d realized that something like spirits tended to him with their warm assurances. Hence his isolation never truly isolated him, never left him truly alone.

Though when it came to associating with others—namely, when it came to

avoiding drawing others into danger and considering the distress when such things actually occurred—avoiding such relationships was so many more times preferable.

But more than that, many orders of magnitude deeper within him, something was breaking down and falling apart.

*I don't belong here.*

The feelings haunted his mind. Except that no particular sense of suffering accompanied these thoughts. At some point in time he had already come to fully accept it.

As a child, nothing weighed on his conscience more than when his mother wept because of him. Even now it stung at his heart. But whenever he grieved for his mother, the impression descended upon him that his life was that much more precious. More than his mother, more than his family, he should be concerned for his own welfare.

Growing with every passing year, this impression eclipsed the anguish and the inward turning of his thoughts. He was forgetting something of supreme importance. Something of great importance that he positively could not put behind him.

During this time, living his life with no purpose in mind, he grew into the knowledge that some part of him was missing and lost beyond all repair.

*Why couldn't he remember?*

That lost year. The love and longing for what he'd possessed during that important lost year grew day by day, the growing distance between *now* and *then* filled only by a growing despair.

He had to return.

But to *where*?



## Part Five

### Chapter 31

[5-1] Upon her return from Mt. Hou, Youko found Shoukei waiting for her in the Seishin.

"Youko, you've got an unusual visitor."

"A visitor?" Youko queried.

Shoukei nodded, and explained that shortly after her departure for Mt. Hou, an envoy had come to the capital seeking an audience with the Imperial Kei.

"Her passport bore the seal of the Imperial Han on the reverse, and she asked to meet with you. As you weren't present, she took up lodgings at a manse in Gyouten. She left with us this letter of introduction from the Imperial Han."

Youko took the letter with a puzzled look. Han and Kei had not enjoyed diplomatic relations in the past. Perhaps this concerned the matter the Imperial En and Enki had been communicating with them about.

A faint fragrance and the sight of beautiful calligraphy greeted her upon opening the letter. The cool black ink and the light blue paper together imparted a sense of great refinement. Youko took a deep breath and shifted her stance.

"Do you want me to read it?" Shoukei softly suggested.

"No. Let me give it my best shot."

Youko struggled with the prose. According to established form, it began with a seasonal greeting. Then what seemed to be an apology for rudely sending an envoy in place of the Imperial Han. They had received the missive from the Imperial En had been received and would spare no effort. But he had a request to make—he wished to arrange a meeting with the general from Tai residing at the palace.

"The letter seems to be requesting a meeting with Risai. Is he asking to send a

servant to the manse or asking to meet with the envoy in the manse?"

Youko showed the letter to Shoukei. Shoukei glanced over it and blinked. "No. He wishes for the general to be sent to the manse. The meeting is for personal reasons only, so we shouldn't read anything of a life or death nature into it." Shoukei added, the surprised evident on her face, "That must mean the Imperial Han himself is residing at a manse in Gyouten!"

"Unbelievable," Youko muttered to herself. "Sounds damned forward of him to me."

"Business as usual. But if he says this involves nothing of a life or death nature, the meeting with the general probably does concern a private matter."

"Which is?"

"The letter doesn't say. I'm only guessing, but the implication is that as far as his visit here is concerned, he wishes us to look the other way. The letter also asks us not to inform the general of the writer's identity. It concludes on that note."

"So it says, but Risai is hardly in a condition to traipsing off to a manse in Gyouten."

"Then our only option is to send a messenger to explain the situation. We should discuss it with the Taiho and Chousai and see what develops."

Youko nodded. A quick meeting with Keiki and Koukan was arranged. The circumstances would be spelled out, and the only option was for the Imperial Han to come to Kinpa Palace. Shoukei was dispatched to the manse with a private communiqué in hand, explaining that Risai was still too indisposed to move, and since waiting until she had healed sufficient was out of the question, would he please come to Kinpa Palace instead?

The composition of the letter, however, was the cause of much consternation.

"It can't be some run-of-the-mill bit of correspondence," Shoukei firmly declared, holding up the letter from the Imperial Han. "Look at this. It should be obvious. This is a person with exquisite tastes. We can't treat him like a commoner."

"Even if you're right, my penmanship still stinks." Youko still hadn't gotten used to writing with a brush. She was quite self-conscious about the rough look of her characters.

"That's why this must be handled with all due consideration. Dash off a note on whatever piece of paper happens to be lying around and it'll look like something destined for the trash bin, no?"

"It's that important?"

"It is. That's why if you use overly pretentious paper, it'll come across as undignified instead. It must be unaffected and in good taste. I'll hunt something up while you practice your handwriting with this."

Youko sighed and set to copying the mockup Shoukei had prepared. And then, after a number of attempts, finally produced a clean version on the paper Shoukei had come up with. The letter in hand, Shoukei ventured down to the city at dusk. When she got back it was night. She wore a curious expression on her face.

"What's up?"

"Ah, well. Tomorrow they shall be visiting the palace. If they came as official guests of honor, the protocols would demand a lot of time and bother. So they repeatedly stressed that this be treated as a personal visit."

"Oh. So what kind of person is the Imperial Han?"

The Imperial Han had reigned for three hundred years, the longest dynasty after the southern kingdom of Sou and the northeast kingdom of En.

Shoukei gazed up at the ceiling, a somewhat perplexed expression on her face.  
"An individual of complete refinement. As far as I can tell."

"Huh," Youko replied.

Shoukei answered with a clever smile. "You'll understand once you meet."

The next day, as promised, word came from the Ministry of State that visitors had arrived from Han. Youko was taking care of the business that had piled up during her trip to Mt. Hou. With a minimum of formalities, she left for the Outer Palace.

One of the manors adjoining the Outer Palace was reserved for welcoming guests. Entering the hall, Youko saw two people waiting for her. One was a tall and stately lady who appeared to be in her late twenties. The other was a girl perhaps fifteen or sixteen. Glancing at the young woman, whose countenance showed no particularly unique features, Youko briefly paused. She looked familiar.

She resembled a girl Youko knew . Of course they couldn't be the same person. That girl Youko knew was dead. Still, the similarity in their appearances made her heart hurt.

The girl curtsied. Returning Youko's curious look, she said with a polite bow, "Thank you for overlooking the abrupt nature of our arrival and honoring us with your presence. We are truly and deeply grateful to present ourselves as the most humble servants of the Imperial Han."

With that, the girl curtsied to the woman behind her. Youko turned her attention to her as well. Was this in fact the Imperial Han? With an air of serene formality, the woman nodded. Youko found herself a bit taken aback. There was nothing pompous about her. At a glance, though modestly attired, she was a strikingly attractive woman. Looking closer, though she wore her kimono and floral jewelry without a breath of pretense, they were quite splendid articles.

And yet the slender and well-proportioned frame struck Youko as nothing if not that of a *man*. And still a perfect fit for the attire. *Of course*. Just as Shoukei had said. *An individual of complete refinement*. Youko was flustered as to where to direct her gaze.

The girl smiled at her. "The Imperial Han wishes to share a few words with you."

Youko nodded, taking this to mean they wished the room cleared. She turned to the Registrar. "Tell the Minister of Protocol to show our honored guests—"

The girl shook her head. "I'm sorry, but whenever and wherever possible, we would prefer to avoid pomp and circumstance. There is no need to disturb the ministers."

"But—"

"If you wouldn't mind. Otherwise, I'm afraid the Imperial Han would be most displeased with me."

"Well, then. Given your leave, I welcome you as my personal guests. This way, please."

The Registrar raised an aggravated voice of protest, but Youko silenced him with a look. As she led the girl from the Outer Palace, the Minister of Protocol could be heard to mutter in aggrieved tones that Han must be a land replete with ill-bred people.

"I'm afraid the manners of my retainers are not all they should be," Youko apologized.

The girl smiled. "Only because His Highness has only barely made Your Highness's acquaintance."

There was something about her Youko couldn't put her finger on. Her figure itself should not draw undue attention, and yet she possessed a kind of magnetic brilliance about her. The one aspect that Youko's friend, buried in a corner of Ei Province, had not shared.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just that you remind me of somebody I used to know."

"I see," the girl smiled.

The other "envoy" said nothing, but followed close behind, a fixed expression on his face, not saying a word. Not only did he have an almost strangely unobtrusive sense about him, but his movements flowed along with remarkable grace. *He must be the Imperial Han*, Youko confusedly thought as she escorted them alone.

Walking to the Inner Palace, they ran into Keiki, headed toward the Outer Palace at practically a run.

"Oh, Keiki. This is—"

She stopped mid-sentence as Keiki, quite unlike himself, gaped. "Your Highness, this is—"

"A servant of the Imperial Han," the girl interrupted with a smile and a bow.

Youko looked amazed as an obviously flustered Keiki did the same. “The Han Taiho?”

“What?” Youko blurted out.

The girl placed her finger to her lips. “Shhh.”

Youko looked back at her with new eyes. Her hair was long, glossy, and black. Youko had never seen another kirin like her. A chance smile came to the lips of the tall person following close behind.

“And where are you taking us?” the girl asked in her carefree manner.

With a start, Youko collected herself and pointed out the garden enclosed by the Inner Palace. The expansive garden reached through the Inner Palace to the library, opposite the Guest Palace. The arbors and pavilions dotting the gardens stood like hideaway cabins among the knolls and hillocks.

Youko led them to one of the abodes and dismissed the servants. The place having been secured, the girl took hold of the collar of her robe. With movement that resembled removing a singlet, she removed a hitherto invisible headdress, revealing the bright sheen of transparent, golden hair.

She turned to the dumbfounded Youko and bowed. “I’m sorry for startling you. Let me greet you on a more proper footling. I am Hanrin.”

She didn’t resemble the girl Youko once knew in the least. Hanrin was, to be sure, the most beautiful creature Youko had ever beheld. She draped the “wig” across her arm, a kind of fabric like delicate gauze.

“Oh,” she said. “This is a *koseisan*. As my true appearance would only get the ministers all in a tizzy, I borrowed it from His Highness. You seemed to have been somewhat taken aback. Did I appear as somebody familiar to you?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Somebody important to the Imperial Kei?” Hanrin’s smile resembled a blossoming flower. “That is one of the attributes of the *koseisan*. Those who look upon it see a reflection of what the heart desires. I do not perceive this when I look in the mirror, and apparently neither does the Taiho.”

“That is because I detected the aura of a kirin,” Keiki sighed and bowed. “In

any rate, let me take this opportunity to welcome you. I believe this is the first time we have formally met.”

“Indeed,” she answered with a nod. “I’m pleased to meet you as well.” She all but tossed her lithe form into the nearest chair. “And how should I address the Imperial Kei?”

“Well, my first name is Youko, and—”

“Good. Then I shall call you Youko. The old grandma that I am, I’ve gotten so I can’t tell one Imperial Kei from the other. How about you, Keiki? There a nickname you prefer?”

“No, Ma’am.”

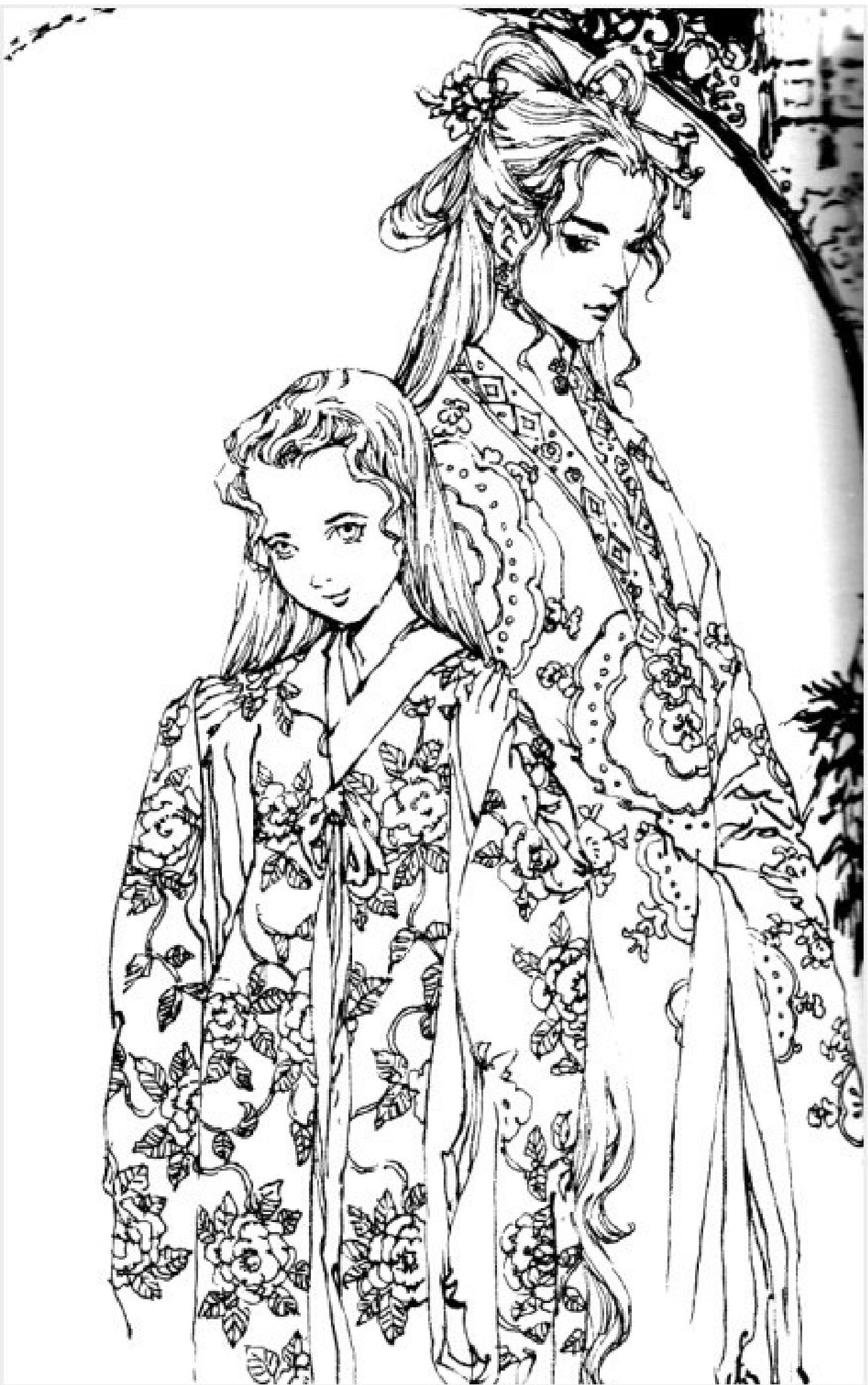
“Oh, that’s too bad. These days, I call myself Risetsu. Of course, His Highness may get it into his head any day to call me something else, so don’t consider that name etched in stone. You know?”

And she cast a look up at the person standing next to her. *But of course*, Youko thought. Keiki just gaped.

“I am the Imperial Han Go Ranshou,” Hanrin’s companion said with a bemused smile.

Youko came back to herself and nodded. She hastily offered him a chair. “I’m sorry. Please, have a seat. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Nothing of the sort,” he smiled.



Hanrin laughed, her voice like a bell. “Don’t sweat it. We set the ground rules for this meeting so there’s no need to fret about protocol. You can leave the apologizing to me.” She tilted her head to the side and said, “I’m pleased you didn’t take any of this the wrong way, Youko. His Highness truly does want to meet this general from Tai. A formal visit would take too much time to arrange and would inevitably turn the Imperial Court upside down. That’s why we adopted this subterfuge.”

“That’s perfectly fine with me. It was Risai you wished to meet, then?” Youko said, turning her attention to the Imperial Han.

He nodded. “According to the rumors coming out of En, this would be the general of the Zui Provincial Guard. Although she is still recuperating, may I assume a meeting would not be out of the question?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. She’s not in any condition to travel far. But the worst of her wounds have healed. She is now working to recover the strength in her legs and arm.”

“I’d appreciate you not mentioning precisely who wishes to visit her. I do not want to startle her. Simply say that a visitor from Han would like to speak to her.”

Youko nodded. “I’ll get her.”

“Hey, seeing that you’re supposed to be arranging this audience as a private individual, it would make more sense if *you* went to see *her*. You can show him the way, can’t you, Youko?”

“Sure,” said Youko, motioning to the Imperial Han.

Slouched in the chair, Hanrin took a firm grip of Keiki’s robe and cheekily waved goodbye.

## Chapter 32

[5-2] When Youko arrived at Taishi's manor, Keikei was in the courtyard leading Risai around by the hand. With some assistance, the gaunt Risai was now able to move around under her own power. The other day she'd been able to climb on Hien's back, which brought her no small measure of satisfaction.

"Youko!" Keikei smiled, seeing her. "Look. Risai's able to walk now."

"Try not to overdo it."

"I'm okay."

Youko nodded and then explained that Risai had a guest. Risai cast her eyes on the person who'd entered after Youko. His eccentric countenance notwithstanding, Risai had the feeling she'd seen him before.

"Keikei, could you leave us alone for a while?"

Keikei agreed without complaint. "I'll go tend to Hien. Yesterday, Risai taught me how to groom him."

"Is that so?" Youko smiled as he ran off. And then turned back to Risai. "He's come from Han. He wishes to speak with you."

Youko put her arm around Risai's shoulders. As they returned to the parlor, Risai became all the more convinced that she'd seen the man somewhere before.

"You seem to be in good spirits," he said, offering Risai a chair.

Risai nodded in gratitude. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

"I've come from Han. There is something I would like you to take a look at."

He took a small, cloth package from the breast pocket of his elegantly embroidered, iron-blue linen kimono. Spreading it out on the table revealed the section of a leather sash. The sash was studded with black silver. The engraved image of a galloping horse graced the metal clasp at one end. Except that the

belt itself was no longer than the span of two hands. It was severed in the middle, and worse, the torn end was stained dark red.

The sight of it propelled Risai to her feet as well as her feet could. She immediately almost lost her balance and toppled over. “That is—”

“Risai?”

“I had heard you were a general in the Zui Provincial Guard. Do you recognize this article?”

“Yes,” Risai replied in a strained voice. “Where did you come across this?”

“In Han. It was found mixed in with a shipment of gemstones from Tai.”

“From Tai—”

“What is it?” Youko asked.

“It belonged to His Highness. I’m positive. This is—” Risai’s words failed her mid-sentence. The identity of the unnamed visitor came to her. She had seen him at none other than Gyousou’s coronation. Risai let go of Youko’s hand and sunk to the ground on her knees. “I was told that it was gift presented by Your Highness at the coronation.”

The Imperial Han nodded. “I did not wish to startle you, but you obviously have discerned the identity of the item. Please, get up and sit down. You’re going to injure yourself.” He flashed Youko a concerned look. “Han has long enjoyed mutual relations with Tai. Though I did not care for the previous Tai emperor.”

“You didn’t care—”

“The man had perfectly awful taste. I simply could not abide someone who took such jolly pleasure in gold and silver-gilded armor.” He made no effort to hide the grimace on his face. “Gyousou, though, struck me as a fine man. Unrefined, but not a bore. And Taiki is such a darling. I simply love that steel-blue mane of his.”

“You don’t say,” Youko said, practically goggling at him.

The Imperial Han laughed. “And so we established a working relationship. Han has no gemstone fountains or mines. However, I dare say that none of the Twelve Kingdoms can best us when it comes to our craftsmanship with precious

metals and jewelry. Tai supplies us with raw materials. We found this article inside a shipment of ore.”

He picked up the belt. “As you can see, the engraved strands in the mane of the galloping horse are clearly discernable. I commissioned the most skilled engraver in the Ministry of Winter to make this for the coronation of the Imperial Tai. This is definitely one of the items prepared as congratulatory gifts. The workmanship required to produce silver as beautifully burnished as this could be found only in the Han Ministry of Winter. The person who found it in the shipment from Tai surmised its providence and sent it to the Ministry, who forwarded it on to me.”

The still kneeling Risai looked up at him. “But where did that shipment come from?”

“Bun Province. Together with ore that arrived from Rin’u. I’ve heard it was the only mine in Rin’u still in operation at the time.”

“Yes,” Risai said, nodding. “That would be the case.”

The Imperial Han turned to Youko. “Tai’s best gemstones come from its gemstone fountains. Streams of water course through the mountains. The seed gems grow steeped in these waters. Where the streams emerge from the rock, the gems are deposited in beds of gravel. The stones from those seams are mined for their gem value, but are not sorted when they come out of the ground. The unsorted tailings are shipped off, the mining marks still on them. The precious stones are sorted later, and then cut and polished by artisans. An artisan purchased a lot of stones and found the belt mixed in with the raw ore.”

“Have you found a lot of this kind of thing?”

“Not at all. Bun Province is known as a gem-producing area. But due to the lack of other exports the area has been mined out. The rare good stones that emerge were handed over to Emperor Kyou. Han ended up getting the dregs. And even those diminished to a trickle over the years. In particular, for the past few years, even the dregs have dried up. No shipments are arriving at all. This article arrived two years after that suspicious Rescript announcing the death of the Imperial Tai. The shipments halted after that. It seems to have fallen into our hands at the last moment.”

"It was severed—" Youko observed.

The Imperial Han nodded. "The Minister of Winter concluded it was slashed by an edged tool. There are bloodstains on the surface and on the back of the belt. So that would seem to be the case."

"Somebody wounded the Imperial Tai—"

"And struck him from behind. Concerned that some sort of calamity must have occurred, we communicated directly with Tai at the highest levels, but the Phoenix would not reply. We heard nothing back from the Ministry of State either. More recently, we were contacted by En and for the first time learned about the particulars of the situation."

The Imperial Han wrapped the belt in the cloth. "I present this to you. I was relieved to hear that this cut does not necessarily mean that the Imperial Tai has been killed. It came into my possession through a strange series of coincidences. Almost as if the Imperial Tai wished evidence of his existence to be known abroad, perhaps?"

"Yes," Risai answered, reverently accepting the cloth package.

"Through this miraculous connection, the Imperial Tai and his subjects are still linked together. You must keep the faith."

"Thank you," Risai said, though her words could not be heard through her tears.

# Chapter 33

[5-3] In her bedroom, Risai took a long look at the belt. *We are still connected.* It was true. Or so she tried to convince herself.

The only working mine near Rin'u about that time was Mt. Kan'you. It was said to be the oldest in Bun Province. From what she could remember, the gemstone fountains had all dried up. The mine only produced small, low-grade stones.

Gyousou had vanished on the outskirts of Rin'u in the heat of combat. And this belt was discovered at Mt. Kan'you. That would suggest that Gyousou's enemies caught up with him at Mt. Kan'you. What happened after that? Though the details were unclear, a small trail of breadcrumbs had been left behind, traces of Gyousou that Risai could pursue if she ever made it back to Tai.

Risai took a deep breath and clenched her fists. The other kingdoms said they would help in the search for Taiki. Even if that did not produce the results they wanted, she had not yet exhausted all her options.

She was trying to convince herself of this when Koshou's big-hearted voice boomed out behind her. "Risai, seen Keikei about?"

Risai glanced over her shoulder. "The Imperial Kei was visiting earlier. I sent him out to play. He said he was going down to the stables."

"That's odd. I took a gander around the stables on my way here and didn't see him. He's not one to stay rooted in one place for too long."

Risai smiled. "He's a lively kid."

"Full of vim and vigor, that's for sure."

"A good boy, too."

"Well, you know—" Koshou grinned self-consciously, as if he himself was the one being praised. "He's a hard worker, all right, and not one to get himself into

a snit."

"He doesn't have any close relatives?"

"His mom and dad died a while back and he ended up at an orphanage. He had an older sister but she got killed."

"That's so sad—"

"A sad story, to be sure. But the way he's dealt with it, there's a big man inside that small body."

"He really is a fine young lad. But is it right for Keikei-dono to be working in the stables, Koshou? Doesn't he have school or other tasks to tend to? Besides, though Hien may have a calm disposition, she's still a kijuu. I know we're talking one chance in a thousand, but—"

"Ah, don't worry about it. He begged to do it himself, after all." Koshou added with a grin, "You don't need to call him *dono*, neither. Just Keikei's fine. Like he said, he's the butler."

"Has he been listed upon the Registry of Wizards?"

"He's too young for that. Youko wants him to make up his own mind when he gets older about what path he wants to follow. It's a bit odd, the way you refer to him. Makes him sound like a little prince or something."

"Do I?" It had never occurred to her. But when she thought about it, that did seem to be the case. "I guess so, now that you mention it."

"You mean you weren't aware of it yourself?"

Risai shook her head. The sound of someone singing somewhere in the manor reached her ears. The clear, bright voice of a vivacious young woman. "I believe that's Shoukei. The Imperial Scribe and the lady-in-waiting come and go around the clock here."

"That's true. Both coming and going, and living here."

Risai blinked. "And which would describe their relationship to you?"

"None of the above," Koshou said, with a wave of his hand. "Let's just say I'm borrowing the place for the time being. No relation whatsoever."

"And no relation to Youko or Keiki as well?" Risai pressed.

Koshou answered with a confused smile. "I know this will sound a bit strange to you. But I started out my career as a ruffian with no connection whatsoever to government ministers and such."

"I believe the Imperial Kei referred to you as a rogue knight."

"Nothing so high-falutin' as that. There was this bad apple of an official, see. And we got a bunch of brave and patriotic souls together to give his butt a hard kicking. Under normal circumstances, raising the flag of revolution would have made us all wanted men. But wouldn't you know it, one of those brave souls happened to be Youko."

"The Imperial Kei? One of your revolutionary band?"

"That's a state secret," Koshou grinned. "Youko's a taika. She wasn't born here. You know about that?"

"Yes."

"That's why she doesn't know anything about this world. So she left the city and went to study at the feet of Enho, who'd been the headmaster of a famous private school. Quite accidentally she happened to get caught up in our little revolt."

"I see." Though she was unfamiliar with the details, Risai nodded.

Koshou lowered his eyes. "Not much time has passed since the coronation. I'm pretty sure she has what it takes to make a great empress. A lot of my mates aren't so sure. Kei hasn't had good experiences with empresses. On top of that, she's a taika. She doesn't understand even perfectly obvious stuff. Everybody looks on her with mistrust. The government has been reorganized but there are still plenty of traitors about. Especially those not happy about how they've been treated and the way things turned out. Nobody knows what they have in store for Youko."

Risai was a bit taken aback. So that's what always went on in a new Imperial Court. Even though Youko had struck her as an empress Kei should have welcomed with open arms.

"There are conspirators about intending to attack the empress and her retinue before everything goes south again. That's why bureaucrats we don't know aren't allowed into the private quarters of the Inner Palace."

Risai perfectly understood. Even when she was housed in the conservatory, she saw very few ministers or officials about. Though the conservatory was inside the Seishin, life there had been awfully quiet. Risai was looked after by the lady-in-waiting, Suzu, and occasionally by the Imperial Scribe, Shoukei. Aside from them, she saw no other lower-ranked officials.

"I thought that was because you were suspicious of me."

"No, that wasn't the case. Few people are allowed in the Imperial living quarters. We don't want the old guard hanging around Youko. Only those we trust completely. We bring people on board only as we get to know them and what kind of people they are."

Risai was amazed at first, but on second thought found this approach quite understandable. As the Imperial Kei had observed, Gyousou had run the provisional court with a firm hand preceding his coronation. To begin with, Gyousou hadn't needed to shake things up that much around the court. As one of the senior statesmen, his popularity was hard-won and deserved. But what had happened in Tai had happened nonetheless.

"So Kei still hasn't turned the corner."

"A little more patience is all we need. I really believe that."

Risai nodded. The Imperial Court in Kei had not returned to a solid footing. Risai had come literally barging in, tempting this young woman—still frantically trying to patch the nascent Imperial Court back together—to sin against Heaven. At this late hour, a recognition of the true gravity of her actions was beginning to seep into her soul. She had committed a terrible indiscretion. The tenaciousness with which she stuck to her objective was nothing to boast about.

The Imperial Kei bore so many burdens. Kei had nothing left over to spare for a kingdom like Tai. And yet, while bearing up the kingdom with one arm, its young empress had embraced Risai with the other. She had even promised to do all in her power for Risai, as if she couldn't be expected to do anything less.

*I should not hope for anything more than this.*

They said they would search for Taiki. And that was enough. Even if Taiki was not found, coming to Kei would not have been in vain.

"That's why," Koshou continued, seemingly a bit abashed at having to admit it, "we keep Youko's retinue to a minimum. Besides Suzu, the only other court lady attending to her on a day-to-day basis is Shoukei, who was appointed Imperial Scribe. The junior retainers are all old friends, or are chosen from among those absolutely trusted by the General of the Palace Guard. That's why we're all cooped up at the Palace. I got a place of my own, but I hardly spend any time there these days."

"And so you're staying here?"

"That's what it boils down to. You know, I've got a kid brother."

"A real brother?"

"Yeah. Right now, he's attending the Provincial Academy in Ei Province. He's living in the dorms."

"He must show a lot of promise."

"Yeah, he does," Koshou said with a bright smile. "I was really glad he got to go, but after he got accepted, to be honest, things got a bit lonely. He's the only family I've got. Suzu's a good friend, but she deserves better than hanging around a bunch of ornery guys. So Youko asked me to look after Enho and Keikei."

"Ah, that would make this the Taishi's place."

"That would. I mean, me looking after Enho hardly means moving the Taishi into the Daiboku's flat. Anyway, Enho is practically glued to Youko's side from morning till night. She's a bit iffy when it comes to the workings of government and still has a lot of studying to do. So Enho lent me these rooms and pretty much gives me free rein to look after whatever needs looking after."

Koshou chuckled bashfully. "I grew up a poor innkeeper's kid. So a guy like me isn't going to get far either if he can't ask people what's good manners and what isn't. I even got to make Keikei mind his p's and q's. The kid's always had a good

head on his shoulders. So I jumped at the chance to take care of Enho. Except without a woman's touch, things of late were grinding to a halt. Finally, Suzu and Shoukei pitched in. What you see here is mostly thanks to them."

"They do keep things moving along at a merry clip."

"That they do," Koshou agree with a laugh. "Youko's got a good nose for people. I think she understood that a big guy like me being Daiboku and all, I was still a sad sack on my own. Hard for me to settle down when there aren't people around. Not to mention that the Palace is more than I can get my arms around. I wouldn't have lasted long cooped in my own manse all by myself. Thanks to the hubbub around here, I manage to hold my own."

"And to make matters worse, I came barging in."

"Youko asked that we keep things down to a dull roar, so I'm sorry about the noise and commotion. And I'm happy you haven't taken offense at our lack of decorum along the way."

"Oh, it's nothing." Risai smiled. She was happy as well to have been entrusted to such a trustworthy man. "The Imperial Kei does seem to have the makings of a great empress."

"It pleases me to hear a general from another kingdom say so. And I hope so too. Unlike people like you and me, the empress and kirin just can't quit and do something else when the going gets tough."

"Very true," Risai agreed with a nod. The empress could either improve herself and continue along that path, or walk the plank to destruction. No detours were allowed.

"The Imperial Tai's a splendid chap as well, I hear. Kantai of the Palace Guard says so. He's our General of the Army of the Left. He says the Imperial Tai was really something even before he was made emperor. He's even known among officers from other kingdoms."

"Yes, I think so too."

"I sure hope they get back okay, the Imperial Tai and the Tai Taiho. The Taiho first, I guess."

Risai nodded again. At the very least, they must find Taiki. Otherwise, there's no hope for saving Tai.

The room fell into silence. She heard footsteps. Keikei had returned. He flung open the door, and flooded in sunlight, ran into the room with a bright smile, clutching a flower.

"Some cotton roses were blooming in the gardens in the north courtyard," he said, holding out the stem of the flower.

Risai glanced at the flower and then at Keikei. "How old are you, Keikei-dono?"

Keikei giggled and said, "I just turned eleven."

"I see. I see."

Keikei's bashful smile dimmed in her vision, distorted by her veil of tears.

"Risai-dono?"

She could no longer see his smile. She reached out and found his small, warm hand, the strength of his concern communicated through his fingers. "Are you happy?"

"Me? Um, well, sure—"

"I see."

*Risai*, called out the carefree voice, seeking her out, running toward her at full tilt, his face beaming. And if Hien was there, asking to pet her—

"The Taiho was about your age."

*Please, God, bring Taiki home*, Risai prayed for the first time. It was painful seeing her expectations betrayed. Wishing for something from the bottom of her heart only deepened the despair when those dreams were dashed. To pray was to hope. That was why she couldn't bring herself to pray until that day.

Risai had watched the people of Tai mutely visit the shrine. Watched them solemnly trudge to the shrine in the middle of snowstorms. Wordlessly, lest any word of protest might reach Asen's ears, they silently approached the shrine and placed a keihaku flower atop it. They expressed thanks for whatever blessings remained, and prayed for the safety of he who had given the flower to them.

While regretting that the people of Tai could do no more than that, Risai had not once visited a shrine. She hadn't been able to. It'd been the same since she'd been told the search for Taiki had commenced. More than the expectation that they would find him was the fear they might not. And even if they did, what happened then? Taiki's return guaranteed nothing.

*Then what did it all mean?* It meant that, however distant and faint the flicker of light, Taiki was a candle on the water.

An old hermit Risai knew through acquaintances had once offered her refuge. He told her to give up. "There is no emperor here anymore."

Garyou, Gyousou's home village in the mountain valleys of I Province in Tai, had been reduced to embers. Risai had gone to I Province in search of Gyousou with the hope he was hiding out in the land of his birth. All she found were ruins shrouded in fog.

"You need to take a load off as well."

"I'm doing fine."

"A kingdom without an emperor goes to wrack and ruin. Everybody knows that. But we don't know that the emperor is dead. If the imperial rites aren't conducted, does the kingdom decline then? Or does the emperor's presence itself protect the kingdom?"

Risai shook her head. "I don't know."

"And thus the era of this new emperor begins with Tai having no emperor. You have looked for him all this time and to no avail. Haven't you done enough already?"

Risai reacted with surprise. "Are you telling me to abandon the emperor?"

The old man shook his head. Deep lines ran through his wise and weathered face. "I'm only saying you should consider your own welfare. You are also one of the emperor's subjects, one of those he must redeem."

"I—"

"If you are to talk about the happiness of the people of Tai, shouldn't you include yourself among them? If you intend to bear the pain of all on your own

shoulders, nobody will end up satisfied.”

Risai nodded dejectedly.

“And yet he remains the only person who can save this kingdom—”

With a sad sigh, the old man got up and left the room, leaving his granddaughter there alone. She gave Risai a sad and wistful look.

“Do you think me a fool as well for wandering around after the emperor?”

The girl shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve never met the emperor. I don’t understand politics. The emperor is somebody who lives above the clouds. Even Taiki is far, far above our stations. But the smoke—”

“What’s that?”

“Looking down from the gates, you can see the whole of I Province and all the smoke hanging in the sky above it.”

“Ah,” Risai said.

Asen could not condone the existence of anything connected to Gyousou. Or anyone Gyousou had governed. Or anyone who ever found fault with Asen personally. Any burg that did not agree with his fancy was rooted up and burned to the ground. Those who turned their backs to him were scattered and driven from their lands.

“Is it true that kingdoms to the south enjoy springtime weather all the year round? That it never snows in Sou? I’ve heard the rivers never freeze over. That a warm sun shines even in winter. And when the storm clouds part, the skies above are as blue as forever—”

Risai nodded. She had never been further south than the Yellow Sea. But the sun shone so brightly there. The sky was truly as deeply blue as forever.

“From the first snow until the last, how many days will the skies be clear? They could be counted on the fingers of one hand. And so the smoke—”

Risai grasped what the child was saying. Instinctively she seized her hand.

“And those few clear days as well are obscured by the smoke. The fires scorch the ground and melt the snow and freeze the rubble solid. How long must the

people of Tai await the spring? It seems like the Imperial Palace is the single remaining spot of blue in a land covered by low, thick clouds. Even those blue skies are turning gray. The smoke that covers Tai like snow blankets Kouki as well. This kingdom has no clear days left."

The girl looked up at Risai, her eyes brimming with sadness. "Kouki must yet dwell under clear skies. In Kouki must be that one spark of spring, that one ray of sunlight that never freezes in the midst of winter."

The girl who had so spoken so resolutely was no longer in this world. She had been executed together with her grandfather for the crime of sheltering Risai. At the time and afterwards they had abetted her escape, even knowing the fate that awaited them.

Risai vowed to herself that she would never forget those words.

*Please save His Highness and the Taiho.*

# Chapter 34

[5-4] The message came two days after the Imperial Han arrived, unexpectedly as was typical of such messages. Three guests would be crossing the Sea of Clouds to see the Imperial Kei. Youko and Keiki were to wait at the reception hall above the Forbidden Gate.

Her visitors were Shouryuu and Rokuta, as she had expected, together with a golden-haired young woman she hadn't seen before.

"Has the Imperial Han arrived?" queried Rokuta, dismounting from his suugu.

"Yes," Youko answered, greeting them with a bemused smile.

"Figures. That's why he suddenly went all incommunicado on me." He turned to the girl climbing off the white kijuu. "This is the Ren Taiho."

A tad flustered, Youko gave her a quick nod. Renrin struck her as a cheerful girl of eighteen or so.

"Renrin, this is Youko, the Imperial Kei. That's Keiki standing next to her." Rokuta asked, "So where's His Royalness and Sis?"

"Probably in their rooms," Youko said with the same wry grin.

They'd rented rooms in Gyouten, but Youko insisted they stay at Kinpa Palace. The Imperial Han, though, proved a man hard to please. She showed him first to the visitor's palace, reserved for guests of honor. But he said it reeked of bad taste and refused to stay there. Finally, he cavalierly picked one of the cottages secluded among the hillocks in the Seiden garden.

And then decided that *this* vase was ugly, so get rid of it. And *that* painting was a sore sight for eyes, so switch it with *this* one. And so on.

After that, he didn't get along with the poor chief butler assigned to look after them. He apparently found the man aesthetically deficient. Exasperated, Youko

sent over Shoukei. Thankfully, he did take a liking to her, but then would barely allow her out of his sight.

Hanrin, on the other hand, making liberal use of Han's crown jewel, the koseisan, wandered at will around the Inner Palace. She suddenly burst into the Seishin—opined that some government official was unacceptably picking on some lowly bureaucrat—and sallied out again.

Shoukei's opinion—the babysitting duties having falling into her lap—was that while on the outside Hanrin might look every bit the spoiled and overindulged ingénue, underneath she was every bit as mischievous as Enki.

"She *is* a handful," Rokuta agreed in a subdued voice.

"So what's the relationship between En and Han?" Youko asked in turn.

"Reluctant allies, as it were. Because Han is a kingdom of such skilled craftsmen."

"Like, the way their workmanship with gold and silver is the best in the Twelve Kingdoms?"

"It's a truth that cannot be denied. Once upon a time, Han was blessed with nothing of worth. It was a middling kingdom full of middling people. The Imperial Han turned that all around, making Han a kingdom of skilled artisans."

"Arts or crafts?"

"Anything that requires a fine and practiced hand. From materials like paper or cloth to the equipment needed to make them. Tools in particular. The tools made in Han are the finest anywhere. Whether a carpenter's rule or the weights in a set of scales, the differences in quality are as night and day."

"Huh."

"We're good at building the big stuff: roads and buildings and ports. But the talents of Han's artisans are a necessary part of the equation. So that would make our relationship a substantial one."

Rokuta sighed, and Youko had a feeling of where that sigh came from.

"I'm not sure how to put this, but I do get the idea that he's a rather odd chap."

"You think? He and Shouryuu get along like cats and dogs." Rokuta glanced over his shoulder. Trailing along behind them, the morose-looking Shouryuu hadn't said a word since he'd joined them.

"Yeah, I kinda got that vibe," Youko muttered.

That was when they ran into Shoukei, coming down the garden path at a brisk clip. She headed towards them as if heading into a stiff wind, her shoes stamping against the cobblestones

"Oh, Shoukei. How's the Imperial Han?"

Shoukei looked back at Youko, fire in her eyes. "He's in his room. Just to let you know, but he can't see anybody right now."

"He can't see anybody?"

"Well, it seems that the hairpins I picked out don't match the outfit, and he refuses to change. See for yourself! I'm not dressing him too! Not going to even *try*."

"So he's been giving you a hard time."

"Hmph," Shoukei pouted, crossing her arms across her chest. "We seem to have arrived at an impasse. As far as *I'm* concerned, the hairpins are fine. It's the *choker* that doesn't go with the *earrings*. I hope you don't mind, Youko, but I've been going through your stuff. Call me stubborn, but a woman's got to do what a woman's got to do!"

Having spoken her mind quite forcefully, Shoukei at last took note of the figures following behind Youko. Her face turned bright red. With a yelp she sank to the ground at the side of the path and bowed deeply. "Forgive me please!"

"A real pain in the neck, eh?" said Rokuta, the laughter evident in his voice. "That kirin of his sure is. She wouldn't be inside, would she?"

"Yeah, um, yes, they are."

"Ah. Well, we have something we need to discuss. The faster you can drag the Imperial Epicure out of his room the better."

"I understand," Shoukei replied, with another bow.

Smothering grins of their own, they continued on their way, arriving at a pair of pagodas surrounded by a curious rock formation. Due to the Imperial Han's idiosyncratic dislike of any of Youko's junior retainers except for Shoukei, nobody was there to greet them. So they simply announced themselves and walked in.

Hanrin lay sprawled on the couch. But it was quite obvious, Youko noted with a wry smile, that the way Imperial Han had moved around the furniture and adjusted hanging scrolls breathed new life into the living space. The man definitely had good taste. And in the midst of it all, Hanrin's unkempt presence was exactly what turned the still life into a living portrait.

"Hey," she said, glancing up from her book. "It's Youko and Keiki." She all but vaulted off the sofa. "Long time no see, Rokuta."

"Yo."

Hanrin pounced down in front of Shouryuu and peered up at his face. "And a long time no see to you too, Shouryuu. I see you showed looking like a country bumpkin. As usual."

"And you're as unhousebroken as usual. Go get your owner."

"No can do. Alas, his Highness still hasn't found a thing worth wearing around here."

With an expression that looked like he'd taken a bite out of a lemon, Shouryuu said, "I don't much care. If nothing suits him, then he can join us in the buff."

"Just the thing I'd expect from an ill-bred boor like you, Shouryuu." Her eyes lit on Renrin. "Well, well, well," she said flirtatiously, and followed with an elegant bow. "I don't believe I've had the honor."

"Um, this is the Ren Taiho."

"It is a pleasure to finally lay eyes on you. I am Hanrin."

With a bright smile, Renrin introduced herself as well.

Hanrin surveyed the room. "I gather the dead serious mood everybody's in has to do with the search for Taiki commencing?"

"That would be the case," Shouryuu answered dourly, motioning for Hanrin to sit down. "I asked you to come to En, but you never showed up. Instead I find

you here.”

“Oh, so that’s why you showed up? Well, good. I much prefer Kei. Your retainers in En really are an uncool lot. All they do is spew hot air all day long.”

“You’re describing yourself. At any rate, it’s been decided that En and Kei, and Han and Ren will conduct the search in Yamato.”

“And China?”

“Sou and Kyou and Sai.”

“A major operation,” Hanrin mused. She tilted her head and asked, “But is it okay, doing this sort of thing? I mean, I don’t think it’s ever been done before.”

“It’s okay,” Rokuta answered. “We kirin searching for Taiki doesn’t run up against Divine Providence.”

“Hmm. So how does this search work? In concrete terms. Send in the Imperial Army?”

“Don’t be silly,” Enki said with a grimace. “Can’t be done. Genkun asked us to keep the shoku to a bare minimum. And besides, it wouldn’t do us any good. Taiki is a taika. Only we kirin can sense the presence of another kirin.”

Hanrin gaped at him. “Are you serious? Isn’t Yamato a pretty big place?”

“Not as big as any one of our kingdoms, if you’re just talking about Yamato.”

“Even so, that’s a whole lot of ground to cover. And only four of us. I could almost swear you’re pulling my leg, Rokuta.”

“I know it’s a tall order. If it wasn’t, then we wouldn’t have asked the other kingdoms to pitch in and help in the first place.”

“But—”

“We found Taiki once before. I can’t remember exactly where it was, but I’ve got a grasp of the general area. There’s no guarantee that Taiki returned to that spot. But our best bet is to start the search there and work outwards.”

“You really plan on launching this dragnet with only that clue to go by? Unbelievable.”

“You want to give up?” Rokuta scowled at her. “If you’ve got a better option,

I'll take it. There isn't one. Obviously there's no telling how long this will take. But if you want to do something on behalf of Tai, it's all we've got!"

The room fell into silence. At length Renrin said, "What about using our shirei?"

"Shirei?"

"Yes. Shirei can detect the presence of their kirin, right? No matter how far away, my shirei will sense where I am and return to me. It stands to reason that shirei should be able to detect other kirin as well. Probably better than we kirin can."

"Indeed," Enki nodded. "What about it?" he said into the air.

"Yes," a voice spoke out of the ether. The voice of Enki's shirei.

"Well, then. What about youma?"

There was no answer.

"You can summon those of your own kind. Of course, we wouldn't want to gather dangerous youma. But the small, harmless ones?"

After another moment of silence, "Yes," came the answer.

"Great. This way we can really leverage our numbers."

"In that case," Hanrin said, raising her voice and clapping her hands together, "Han does have the *Kouyoukyou*."

"The *Kouyoukyou*?"

"Yes. The *Kouyoukyou* dematerializes the person whose image it reflects. Only beings capable of the *tonkou* can use it. With it, theoretically, shirei and youma could replicate themselves infinitely. The replicated portion is limited in its capabilities. But if searching for someone is all that is called for, then it should prove sufficient."

"And Ren has the *Gogoukanda*," said Renrin. "The *Gogoukanda* creates a wormhole to the other side without triggering a shoku. People cannot pass through it, nor can it handle large number of beings at one time. But using it greatly minimizes the effects of a shoku. It was used once before to retrieve

Taiki. When the En Taiho discovered his location, he was transported to Mt. Hou using it.”

“Fantastic!”

A cool voice interrupted Rokuta’s celebratory mood. “Does not the problem remain as to why Taiki has not returned of his own volition?”

Everybody turned around. The Imperial Han was standing in the doorway to the bedroom. He was dressed in a dazzling white silk robe. Shoukei stood behind him, a rather smug look on her face.

“So you finally decided to join us? What’s that question supposed to mean?”

“What’s it supposed to mean? If Enki got unwillingly swept away to Yamato, would you settle down there?”

Rokuta was momentarily at a loss for words.

“If it was Enki, then I’d say he’d happily given his Monkey Emperor the slip. But Taiki never struck me as such an ingrate. He would definitely try to return. And yet he hasn’t in six years. I think it best to consider the circumstances that would explain this.”

“We know that. We also know there’s no way to know. In any case, we’re not going to find him if we don’t look. Still, putting yourself in his shoes, can you imagine those circumstances?”

“Well—” The Imperial Han stared off into space. “Putting myself in his shoes, I’d say that it’s because he’s not a *ki*.”

“He’s not a *ki*? ”

“The true nature of a kirin serving his emperor, and the wellspring of a kirin’s compassion for the people. The part of him that would urge him to return for the good of his emperor and the good of the people. And that which would imbue him with the ability to do so. Because he cannot, I believe the only conclusion is that he is not a kirin.”

“How can a kirin not be a kirin?”

“I’m not sure we can know,” the Imperial Han stated curtly. “But Taiki is a taika.”

"He is, but so what?"

"I'm not sure how to explain it. Hanrin will probably only cease to be a *rin* when she passes away. But what happens to a taika kirin when he is in that other world? That, to put it simply, is the thought that occurred to me."

# Chapter 35

[5-5] It was midsummer when Youko informed Risai that the search for Taiki had begun. The enervated feelings accompanying the oppressive heat stole even into the Imperial Palace. Sleep came hard enough already, and her mounting impatience as she awaited word of good news disturbed her rest all the more.

"No need to worry," Rokuta cheerfully assured her at first. "We'll find him right away."

But his expression had soon turned cloudy. There was no sign of Taiki in Yamato where Rokuta had found him once before. They extended the search but nothing had yet turned up.

Unable to sleep, Risai got out of bed and walked to the visitor's palace. A large garden surrounded the palace. The guest quarters were located in Seikou Manor. Seikou Manor was connected to a library called Ransetsu Hall. Ransetsu Hall had been turned into the command center for Taiki's search.

Stopping in several times every day had become something of a compulsion for her. And though her visits were always met with disappointment, it nevertheless quenched her unbearable thirst for the time being.

This night as well she headed toward Ransetsu Hall, in her now constant quest to quench the thirst in her soul. Rokuta was there, slumped exhausted in a chair.

"En Taiho," she said.

"Yo," he replied and smiled. His face really did look haggard.

"You haven't found him?"

"Ah," Rokuta said in a low voice. As if sensing her despair over her sheer uselessness, he injected a note of cheer into his voice. "Well, you know, this is how these things go. Something's bound to turn up sooner or later."

"Yes," was the only thing Risai could think of to say. There wasn't a thing she could do to help. The best and the brightest in the Kingdom tended to her body and looked after her every need, and yet all she could do in turn was watch. For her to find fault with the slow pace of developments would be beyond presumptuous.

"You in the mood for some tea? I was getting a hankering myself."

Risai smiled. She lit the small hibachi on the desk, filled the cast iron pot with water and set it on the hibachi.

"Maybe he's not in Yamato."

Risai froze for a moment. "Then China?"

"Hard to say. But the Imperial Han was right. The problem remains why Taiki has not returned of his own accord."

"And the circumstances that might prevent his return?"

"Easy to say but hard to describe. What do you think?"

"I'd have no way of knowing, but—"

"Taiki caused a meishoku. Keiki insists that Taiki would not know how to cause a meishoku. Assuming that it did occur, something must have triggered it, something entirely instinctual. I can empathize with that. More than being swept away to there, I think it was more like Taiki fell off a cliff. He fell off a cliff *here* and landed *there*."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that between the entrance and exit of the Gogou Gate is a path headed both nowhere and everywhere. Think of it as the Forbidden Gate or the Five Gates. It's not as if you can stand in the gate and ahead of you is the other world and behind you is this world. It's more like there is a tunnel between the entrance and the exit."

"Ah," Risai said, nodding. An enchanted pathway. Like the enchanted staircases crisscrossing the Imperial Palace.

"We know that Taiki is not *here* and that he did enter the gate. But there's no way of knowing whether Taiki left the gate and is *there*."

"That would mean—" Risai said, turning to face him. "That would mean being trapped within the gate?"

"Hard to say. It is possible that Taiki never made it there. I traveled *there* using the Gogoukanda provided by Renrin, but while passing through I had to keep hold of Renrin's hand. Though it might be better to say I was holding onto the tail of the Gogoukanda. There are two tails going into two directions, and with Renrin's guidance I had to hold onto one. If I didn't, I'd end up chasing my own tail. Because once you've gone in, you can't turn around and go back."

"So you're saying that Taiki might have gotten turned around like that."

"I don't really know. Comparing the Gogoukanda to a meishoku may be completely inappropriate. I simply got to wondering whether Taiki made it through to the other side. Aside from that, there's no reason to get overly concerned. Taiki was swept away as a taika, was born over there and grew up a normal kid. He's got parents there and a home. I believe it was at his parents' home that I found him the last time. Unfortunately, I can't remember where that is. I remember the general vicinity. Yamato is a pretty big place, but I did remember what town it was adjacent to. Because he triggered the shoku and fled instinctually, he might well have gone back to his home town. But I could find no evidence of him there."

"Probably because that's not where it was. Someplace else perhaps?"

"I thought so too. I went through the place house by house starting in the middle of town and working north and then south. But couldn't find a trace of him anywhere. Well, it was pretty much a seat-of-the-pants once-over."

His tone of voice suggested he'd added that last part for Risai's benefit.

"Next time, I'll take a more careful approach. Like going up to people and asking them about weird stuff that might have happened six years ago. It'll take time, though."

"Yes."

"During that time, it'd be nice if somebody ran into him in China. In any case, we can't keep imposing on Hanrin and Renrin forever. Not to mention Keiki. Kei still needs a lot of work. Sooner or later we're going to have to resign ourselves

to the reality of the situation, and the search will no doubt end up on the back burner. When that time comes, I want you to understand.”

“No, not at all. I know these things can’t be helped,” Risai said, struggling to keep from betraying too much emotion.

*You can’t keep asking for more*, she told herself. Though deprived of an arm, she was regaining her health. She knew that something calamitous had happened to Gyousou on Kan’you Mountain at the outskirts of Rin’u. Regardless of how the search for Taiki turned out, she could return to Tai and resume her search for Gyousou. Her journey to Kei had not been in vain. Her link to Gyousou still existed.

“Even in that case, we’re not casting Tai aside. We promised to do what we can for the refugees from Tai and those who still remain in Tai.”

“Thank you,” Risai murmured, almost despite herself.

At that moment, a light flashed across the dark room. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw faintly glowing doorway deeper back in Ransetsu Hall. She got to her feet. The doorway led to a short corridor. Down the hall and around one corner she came to a small building called the Kokinsai.

The light was shining from the center of the Kokinsai. It looked like the light of the Moon shining through a window. But there weren’t any windows in the Kokinsai. And there was a new moon this night. A round patch of white light glowed upon the floor, but there was no other light source. That was to be expected as well. For the light was coming not from above, but below the floor.

“The Gogoukanda,” said Risai, stepping into the room.

The ring of light slowly widened until a human figured slipped out. One person at first, then followed by a second. At the same time the two of them emerged, the light faded as if retreating into the distance and winked out.

“Ah, Risai,” Hanrin said. She raised her voice and said, bolting down corridor and into the library. “Rokuta! Something strange is afoot!”

“Strange?” Rokuta was leaning back wearily in his chair. He quickly righted himself.

Hanrin nodded. “The shirei are saying they won’t venture any further. They’re quaking in their boots.”

“What?”

“They’re saying there’s no way they’re getting any closer than they are now!”

“I don’t understand a thing you’re saying. Renrin, what’s going on?”

“What she said.” Ranrin came into the hall with the same concerned look on her face. “It doesn’t make any sense to me either. The shirei are spooked. *Something wicked this way comes.* That’s what they all keep saying.”

“Wicked?”

“Yes. Hanrin wanted to go back to Taiki’s home town for another look around. But the shirei said that a Big Bad was lurking about, and they weren’t going one step further.”

“What do they mean by that? Weren’t you there previously?”

“That’s correct. According to the shirei, it *was* there before, but only in whispers. Juuko? Could you please explain?”

“Yes,” a voice answered dryly.

From behind Renrin’s skirts, a small, tailless dog appeared. The beast narrowed its one blue eye. Along with the hair hanging down like an old man’s eyebrows, it created a perplexed-looking expression.

“Like I said, something wicked is going on there.”

“Like what?”

“I wouldn’t know. Except I’m not getting up close and friendly with it.”



"That's not helpful. You said it was there before?"

"Yes." Juuko seemed to shrink away from the thought. "That's the way I remember it. Before, I caught a fleeting glimpse, so fleeting that it barely registered. I put it out of my mind. But the other night there was nothing fleeting about it. The whisper had turned into a whirlwind. Something unholy. I'm sorry, but I'm not getting anywhere near it. Taiho or no Taiho."

"What does *unholy* mean? Is that the kind of vibe it's giving off?"

"No, that's not it. Something calamitous. Something impure. Something dangerous. Though this creature would seem to come in a small package, it is anything but diminutive. We are keeping our distance from it."

"Diminutive?" Rokuta hazarded dubiously.

Risai broke in forcefully, "Hold on a minute. I'm sorry for interrupting, but what if you were sensing the aura of a very powerful youma? Would you have the same sort of reaction?"

Juuko practically did a back flip. "Yes! That's it! And no ordinary youma at that. The kind of youma none of us could imagine sidling up to. Escorting our Taiho there—"

Risai raised her voice and said—at the same time that Rokuta muttered to himself—"Gouran."

"Who?"

Risai ran up to Juuko and knelt down in front of him and leaned over and said, "Where? Where was it? That was Taiki's shirei. I don't doubt it for a second."

"But that thing possesses the aura of a creature that could never become a shirei."

"Taiki has a *toutetsu* as one of his shirei. It was a toutetsu. Wasn't it?"

Juuko perked up his ears. Even his hair stood on end. "Toutetsu. You must be kidding me!"

Risai grabbed hold of Renrin's sleeve with her only hand. "Ren Taiho, Taiki is most definitely there!"

She was on the verge of collapsing. Gentle arms caught her and buoyed her up.

“We understand. Rest assured we shall bring him back with us.”

“You cannot!” Juuko pranced up and down in a fury. “That’s no shirei! That’s a youma!”

“I won’t stand for such timidity, Juuko. If it really is a youma, then there must be a reason such a powerful youma is in that other world. It must be in the company of Taiki. We’ll have to determine whether Taiki is there or not. If you find the notion so unpalatable then I shall go there by myself.”

“I get it, I get it,” Juuko grumbled, hanging his head.

“Renrin—” Rokuta said, heading down the hallway. “Send me through. I’m going to go take a look. What about you, Sis?”

Hanrin’s eyes darted around the room. “Yes. Of course. Be right with you. But —”

Renrin plucked the piece of sheer fabric from her quailing hand. “Can I use this as well?”

“Um, yes.”

“If you don’t mind, then. In the meantime, why don’t you inform the others what is going on?”

“I will!”

Youko and Keiki hurried over to the Kokinsai as soon as word came from Hanrin, just as two figures emerged from the pool of light.

“Enki, did you find him?”

“I don’t know,” answered Rokuta. The fatigue of the last few days had evaporated from his features. He strode energetically back to the library, where the Imperial En and Imperial Han were waiting.

“What about Taiki?” they both asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him.”

“You didn’t see him? What do you mean?”

"I'm quite sure *that* was Gouran. Taiki's shirei. Except I would definitely not call *that* a shirei. I understand what's got our shirei spooked. *That* is definitely a youma. And damned scary and powerful to boot."

Renrin entered the library at this point, her face pale. "That is indeed what I would call a Big Bad. Get anywhere near the thing and it's as clear as day. I have a grasp of the location. It's a large town but Gouran is there. I can't detect the aura of a kirin."

"The risks notwithstanding, we took a closer look and detected not even a vestige. I think the Imperial Han is correct on this."

"Am I?"

Rokuta nodded. He still looked like his hair was standing on end. "There was no kirin there. I believe that Taiki is there. But not in a form that could be called a *ki*."

"Then in what form?" Youko asked.

Rokuta and Renrin exchanged glances. "Hard to say. Still, if Gouran is there, Taiki must be there as well. Gouran couldn't have returned to youma form. He's still serving Taiki as his shirei. However, not even a glimmer of the kirin's aura exists. Even if Taiki wanted to return, he couldn't. I have no choice but to conclude he is loosing his *ki*. Otherwise, even in that other world, there'd be no cause for his aura to die out."

"Does such a thing ever happen?"

"I wouldn't know. We can only contemplate that it can. Our only recourse at this point is to conduct a house-to-house search. Find him and bring him home. We can't fuss about the methods. Gouran is as much a threat over there as he would be here."

# Chapter 36

[5-6] The season would soon turn from summer to fall. But inside Ransetsu Hall, a heavy, exhausted atmosphere suffused the room. After conducting numerous searches, Taiki's whereabouts remained uncertain. All that stood out amidst the background noise was Gouran's aura. It swamped the dwindling rays of the kirin, giving them no firm purchase on his location. The map Rokuta carried around was a hash of useless lines, places crossed out and filled in.

Shouryuu asked, "Couldn't we determine Taiki's location by zeroing in on Gouran?"

"No," the kirin all answered.

Hanrin shrugged and said under her breath, "If it was that simple, you big dummy, we would have found him already."

"We know that he's there. We know from that bad feeling we're all getting blasted with. Because that feeling gets worse the closer we get, we know we're getting warmer. But that's all."

"Then why can't you just head in the direction that's getting warmer?"

"Just to clue you in," said Hanrin, looking at Shouryuu, "but, sure, if Gouran was a post stuck in the ground, then finding him would be a piece of cake. And all the easier without the noise kicked up from all these damned reluctant shirei and their unconstrained instincts running around to and fro. But Gouran is on the move. His powers wax and wane. Probably his aura changing when he's awake and when he sleeps. So even aiming at where the powers are concentrated, we'll end up missing the mark. And there's no telling whether we were off by a mile or whether Gouran simply decided to take a nap!"

Quite unconscious of her actions, Hanrin even stamped her feet for emphasis, her irritation expressing all her accumulated fatigue and frustration.

"Hey, don't take it out on me."

"If I was taking it out on the likes of you," Hanrin shouted, "I'd be the one getting broken!"

She turned and rushed out of Ransetsu Hall. As Shouryuu gaped at her disappearing form, a fan whacked him on the side of the head.

"Hey, Monkey Man, lay off my princess."

Shouryuu grimaced and picked up the fan the Imperial Han had flung at him.  
"Listen, you son of a b—"

"The Taiho are trying their best. And yet their best hasn't proven good enough. Who more than anyone has the right to be upset about that? You and I are mere observers here. All this nitpicking won't improve things."

Shouryuu maintained a stony silence.

"In particular, Risetsu is quite frightened of Gouran. She's a much more sensitive creature than that little baboon of yours."

"You mean she's timid. It's unlikely that Taiki is going to lose control of him."

"As a unicorn she is finely attuned to peril. She cannot help that her true nature shrinks from such dangers. Her natural instincts are much stronger than those of the taika kirin. It's not something she has control over, so keep your criticisms to yourself."

The Imperial Han glanced at Renrin and Keiki. "You too as well. Don't push yourselves unreasonably. I think it's time we called it a day. When the days go on like this, the body tends to get run down. The Kei Taiho in particular must be taking time out from his busy schedule to be here."

"Indeed," Renrin agreed with a sigh.

When they glanced at Keiki as if for confirmation, he nodded, and with apparent reluctance left the hall.

"He does look quite tired," Shouryuu muttered, watching Keiki leave.

The Imperial Han agreed. "It's exhausting, even using the Gogoukanda. Well, I'm off to console my princess and tuck her into bed." With a rustle from the

hems of his robes, the Imperial Han exited the hall.

Only Shouryuu and Renrin remained. Glancing at Renrin, who showed no signs of departing herself, Shouryuu asked quizzically, “You’re not going to bed?”

“No. Before retiring, I wish to dive through one more time. You needn’t worry about me.”

“As annoying as the man may be, that guy from Han isn’t far wrong. You are shouldering a burden greater than all of ours. You need to take good care of yourself. Best you get some rest.”

Every time one of them used the Gogoukanda, Renrin had to be there to supervise their goings and comings. The kirin who accompanied her could spell each other off, but her presence was required at all times.

“I haven’t yet reached my limits.”

“I don’t quite believe you.”

Renrin laughed thinly. “The fact is, sleeps escapes me whenever I think about Taiki being swept away into that other world. I’m plagued by questions like what in the world happened there, and what we should do next. It’s all my mind can dwell on. My head knows that he would have grown up by now, and yet he was so small and such a child. Things like that.”

“You’ve met Taiki previously?”

“Yes. Only twice. The first time was when he returned to Mt. Hou. And that because I lent Sanshi the use of the Gogoukanda. The second time was right before those strange things started happening in Tai. He journeyed to Ren to officially express his thanks for our help at Mt. Hou.”

She couldn’t forget how he appeared to her at that time. Thinking about the unfortunate events that followed, the times they enjoyed together grew all the more painful. Though it was unlikely that Ren would enjoy another such visit from so distant a kingdom, she never imagined a separation of this magnitude.

“The Imperial Ren is quite concerned as well. Taiki and the Imperial Tai being so separated is an ill wind that blows no good.”

“An ill wind?”

"Taiki appeared to be extremely fond of the Imperial Tai. Taiki wished from the bottom of his heart to serve his emperor and make him proud of him. The Imperial Ren says that the same way my absence from the Imperial Palace leaves him at loose ends, he is sure that Taiki could never find a place to call his home without the Imperial Tai there in his life. And I think the same could be said about me. But all of that aside, an ill wind is bound to blow whenever a kirin is separated from his liege."

"Ah, yes, that sort of thing—"

"We cannot thrive without an emperor by our side."

Being apart from the emperor meant being divided in body and soul. It was said that kirin existed for the good of the kingdom and its people. But that wasn't the whole truth. Or so Renrin had come to believe.

"The emperor exists on behalf of the kingdom and the people. We exist for the emperor." Renrin hung her head and buried her face in her hands. "What manner of creatures these emperors are—"

A warm hand patted her on the shoulder. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Renrin raised her head. "Could I ask you to keep an eye on the map?"

"Done."

Renrin smiled and returned to the Kokinsai. And for the umpteenth time that day sank down into the ring of light created by the tail of the silver snake.

She emerged in the midst of a stark cityscape adorned by neither green fields nor mountains. It abutted the ocean, though the shore was damned and sealed with concrete. It appeared to her as an entirely unpleasant place.

The city itself was like a huge cavern. The question of why anybody would live here no doubt occurred to her because she was not one of the city's residents. With leaden spirits, she continued her search from where she had left off last time. Her instinctual desire to avoid the reliable guide that was Gouran's aura was only her own cowardice speaking.

Glancing about the vacant, moonlit streets, she chose the course in which she felt the least inclined to proceed.

Gouran was probably awake. His aura was much stronger than earlier, when she'd lost track of him and given up for the time being. Though the nature of the aura was easily comprehended, that was the part that made her quail. Unconsciously she tried to detour from the path ahead. She pressed forward, forced herself against the currents.

Finally, facing the source of her fear and loathing, her endurance reached its limits and she sank to her knees.

Juuko timidly sprang forth. "Taiho. Renrin-sama."

"I'm okay," she smiled. She put down a hand to help right herself.

And there she found it—

—a shimmering filament of gold, as gossamer thin as a spider's thread, on the verge of evaporating into the air. But she knew what the fleeting glimmer represented. It was Taiki. Its dusky glow suggested his infirmed state. Thus the odds against any of them stumbling across its lingering traces.

Renrin raised her eyes. She couldn't see any other shimmering threads on the streets winding between the tall buildings. Only this glowing ember, left behind like a footprint in the sand or a bloodstain on the ground.

"Did you find something?"

The vastness of time and space separated the Taiki she had once met in Ren and this faint, glowing spark.

"There is no doubt. He is here."

So little life remained in this lingering fire that she could not tell when it had been left here. The thread itself was torn and could not be followed any further. It confirmed only what they already knew: that he was somewhere in this city. However, having at long last discovered it was for Renrin a more than sufficient reward for all their hard work.

"Wait for us. We will find you."

She touched it lightly with the tips of her fingers. As if overwhelmed by the presence of her own aura, the light winked out.

## Interlude

### Chapter 37

[5-7] The darkness was beginning to rust, as if stained by the reddish-brown color of dried blood. Sanshi as well was enveloped by the dirty orange, the corroding impurities. At the same time, she felt her impatience and frustration growing

*This is my Taiki.*

Something was building up inside him like poison. At some point in time, its accumulated mass began devouring his life force. His life force grew thinner by the day. At this rate he would surely die. All would be lost.

*Shall we kill them?* came the grating voice from the rusty darkness.

“Stop it. For the time being, these people taking care of Taiki are necessary to him.”

“He is their captive.”

“They can’t be killed while he is their captive.”

“But the poison increases.”

“I know,” said Sanshi, her hands tearing at her chest. Her pallid skin was covered with numerous wounds from which trickled drops of red.

They would die. They would be slain.

That fate aside, her impatience further constricted her consciousness. By now, Sanshi had come to see every inhabitant of this world as her enemy. Their jailers lived with Taiki in the prison. They surrounded the prison. They watched Taiki and attempted to inflict harm on him at every opportunity.

Whenever Sanshi and Gouran sought revenge, the darkness and corrosion only

increased, harming his life force, and contaminating Sanshi. By now, Sanshi could no longer distinguish between what happened *there* and what was happening *here*.

All she knew was that their enemies were about—whatever had tried to assassinate Gyousou, steal the throne, and steal Taiki’s life away as well.

That was something she absolutely could not allow.

Looking back on what had happened, everything had arisen from subtle misunderstandings on Sanshi’s part as she stumbled over the differences between *here* and *there*. Sanshi could not comprehend that the world surrounding Taiki differed from her own in its very foundations.

From every payback delivered in Taiki’s defense sprang a new torment, that before long attracted new hostility and contempt. The persecutions intensified, as did her vengeance. The intensity of the retribution invited more persecution. And so the circle grew, feeding back on itself.

Taiki had become a threat to this world, an object of loathing. Sanshi couldn’t grasp that. The staining blood that flowed from her vengeance, and the gathering grudges, further blackened Taiki’s shadow, and further unleashed Sanshi’s—and especially Gouran’s—youma natures. And in inverse proportion dampened their reason and sense.

A total breakdown loomed before their eyes.



## Part Six

### Chapter 38

[6-1] Renrin ran into Ransetsu Hall. “I’ve found him,” she called out.

Keiki and Rokuta leapt to their feet. Slumbering in her master’s lap, Hanrin perked up her head as well.

“Taiki’s aura. And it wasn’t left too long ago.”

“Where?”

Rokuta ran over with strides as long as his legs could manage. Together they returned to the Kokinsai. Keiki followed after them. Hanrin took off for Seikou Manor like a shot.

At the end of the winding corridor, a wan light spilled from the mouth of the Kokinsai. The tail of the silver snake wrapped around Renrin’s arm still illuminated the round circle of light. Taking her hand, Keiki passed through the glow. Coming to the end, it widened into a dark, inorganic cavity.

The sterile cavern that was this room was a perfectly square, box-like structure. Thirty or forty drab, aseptic-looking desks were arranged in rows. A dilapidated air hung over the prison-like room, like that lingering around old ruins.

Observing all this, Keiki remembered something. “This is a school, perhaps?”

Keiki had observed rooms like this before, when he’d traveled to Yamato to meet Youko.

“A classroom?” suggested Rokuta.

As he always did, Keiki felt discomfited by Rokuta’s presence. Normally his golden, gleaming hair marked him clearly as a kirin. But the boy standing there did not resemble Enki at all.

“I bet it’s Taiki’s school,” Rokuta muttered, casting his gaze around the place.

Following after Rokuta, Renrin appeared, and the wispy glow in the corners of the room winked out.

“En Taiho, Kei Taiho, it’s over there.”

Renrin moved quickly between the desks and pointed at a spot on the floor.  
“Here. The shirei discovered it.”

Behind her, the forms of her companions wavered half-transparent in the air, now and then losing their human contours and revealing the beasts within.

Renrin turned to the flickering shadows and pointed at a deep purple spot on the floor. A thread of light glowed there, as if clinging desperately to life, continuing on in dots and dashes.

“This is the aura of a kirin?”

“I believe so. However—” said Keiki. His words seemed to loose their way in the shadows.

“It continues in that direction.”

With a slight shiver, Renrin followed along the wall of the classroom. Silhouettes prowled the empty, dark corridor like so many ghosts. On the floor beneath the feet of the prowling shirei were scattered the thin remnants of light, like a trail of breadcrumbs cast down by the lost kirin.

“It ends there, but it’s definitely Taiki. Moreover, I believe this trail was laid down in the past few days.”

Keiki furrowed his brows and nodded firmly. “You are undoubtedly correct, however—”

Rokuta picked up where Keiki’s voice trailed off. “For a kirin, an ominous sign.”

“It’s contaminated,” said the small dog-like creature, appearing at her feet. It lowered its snout to the floor and sniffed the wane glow. “I smell blood. Cause for worry.”

“You think so, Juuko?”

“I’m positive. The maledictions of blood and accumulations of poisoning impurities. Something has happened to sicken Taiki. Something quite bad.” He

turned his muzzle again towards the floor and growled ominously. “This is the aura of his Nyokai. She has the smell of death about her.”

That odor was clear to Renrin and Keiki and Rokuta. An ominous, unclean smell that swamped what should be the clear, bright tones of the kirin’s aura. Something indeed had happened to Taiki. It was entirely unclear what. But one thing was clear. The stench of combat hung around this place.

“Gouran has taken on the character of a youma. Sanshi’s aura is being torn asunder. Something bad is happening in Taiki’s environment.”

Keiki nodded in blank amazement to Rokuta’s observation. The aura of blood and violence. Taiki was caught in that vortex, his nature as a kirin being stripped away. It would not last long at this rate.

“If we don’t hurry, all will be lost. Taiki is very ill. And more than Taiki’s illness, we must consider the faltering shirei. Though Gouran and Sanshi don’t appear to have lost their powers, if things don’t change soon, Taiki will drown in this festering whirlpool.”

Keiki brushed his fingers against the remnants of light. “His powers of judgment would be affected. If this stupor came upon him as a result of the shirei falling ill, that would constitute the main source of the impurities.”

“You’re probably right. Any and all provocations ending in bloodshed. The tiger chasing its tail into eternity.”

And when he lost hold of his essential nature, Taiki would lose control of his shirei as well.

“Did we understand that this is how things would turn out?” Renrin implored, turning to face the gloom around her. From here and there the many creeping and crawling shadows answered her with only a cruel silence. Renrin buried her face in her hands.

“We are definitely getting close, and yet—”

“Let’s keep looking,” said Rokuta. “We should be able to find where this thread breaks off.”

He set off into the dark cavern, where no glimmer of light could be seen.

Renrin and Keiki followed after him. Vacant classrooms lined one face of the corridor. A staircase like a well shaft sunken into the earth. Within the uninhabited stillness and tightly-coiled blackness, they wandered to and fro, seeking the strands of fading light. Around the building similarly crept the grotesque forms of the shirei, searching for the fading evidence.

"I can't find anything anywhere," a dejected Renrin said.

They had searched the building inside and out. Renrin returned to the classroom where those shimmering filaments had first appeared and sadly studied them. The tracks continued to glitter wanly, casting off the strange scent. They didn't appear to have been laid down today or yesterday, but the lack of any newer traces suggested that Taiki might not be here at all.

"En Taiho, Kei Taiho, what shall we do?"

"We don't know where he's gone." Rokuta let out a deep sigh.

Keiki said stiffly to Rokuta, "This is no time for despair. There is no need for it either. We have ascertained that he was here in the past. This constitutes anything but grounds for capitulation. He was here before. He may appear here again. In any case, we should expand our search efforts with this location as the locus."

Renrin nodded. She called out, "Hanshi." With a sound like tape peeling off glass, a black shadow detached itself from the floor and stood up. "You did a good job finding this. I'd like you to stay behind and keep watch."

The shadow raised its head like a cobra and waved its body as if in agreement. Then just as quickly slithered away, rejoining the shadows at her feet.

# Chapter 39

[6-2] The fleeting glow filled the Kokinsai and winked out. Rokuta emerged first, leading the way. He scanned the faces of the assembled group waiting there and bowed.

"It is Taiki. We are certain. But he is ill and his condition is serious."

"How is he ill?" asked Risai, her voice grating as she forced the question from her throat.

"We don't really know. Probably the impurities in his environment. His body is being compromised by exposure to blood. The situation in that respect is grave as well, the likely reason Taiki's aura is so faint."

"Does that mean he hasn't yet lost his kirin nature?"

"No," said Rokuta, averting his gaze. "Taiki can no longer be called a kirin. The best way to look at it is that he's lost most of his powers. And the poison is gaining on him. The shirei are all but running wild. He can't even control them."

"It's that bad? But Taiki—"

"His aura was interrupted. We couldn't follow it. But he should be there. We're going to find him as quickly as possible and bring him home."

Risai peered at Renrin and Keiki as they stepped out of the ghostly light. Their faces were dark with anguish. Their countenances were clearly telling her that unless Taiki was found and returned quickly, then things would get very grim indeed.

"Isn't there—isn't there anything else we can do?" she cried out.

Renrin hung her head apologetically. "As things stand now, we're simply too short-handed." She lifted her head. "Besides, when we do find him, how should we bring him back?"

“How?”

Renrin nodded and then turned to the rest for help. “If Taiki has lost his kirin nature, wouldn’t that mean that he has become a mere human, a Japanese? Is there a way of bringing such a person here?”

Listening from her corner of the room, Youko started. She’d definitely heard it said that no human could come to this world on purpose.

“If he has become a normal human, then he cannot pass through the Gogoukanda. And even if he could, there are those giant shirei to deal with. Forcing them through could trigger a shoku.”

Rokuta tipped his head to the side, as if in contemplation. “We’ll never know until we try. Except that Taiki may now appear to this world as a foreign substance, and would as a consequence be rejected him. Moreover, trying to force him through could cause great damage both here and there.”

“I—” Youko started to say. “When I covenanted with Keiki, I was not yet a duly-recognized empress. Keiki was somehow able to bring me here. So it seems to me that even if Taiki loses his kirin nature, he should be able to as well. Both of us started out as taika, after all.”

“Youko was mostly an empress. But Taiki is now mostly *not* a kirin. There’s no telling what would happen, or how Heaven would perceive this.” The Imperial Han continued in his level-headed fashion. “If we do not retrieve him, Tai will continue to drown. So do we bring him back at the possible cost of great destruction, or else quickly put him out of his misery and wait for another taika may grow?”

“Don’t spout such preposterous things.”

“If the thought is so repulsive to you, then you must accept the dreadful consequences that will otherwise occur.”

“I know—” Rokuta started to say when Hanrin interrupted in a tremulous voice, “If Taiki was an ordinary person, he could be appointed a wizard, couldn’t he?”

“A wizard—”

"A wizard could cross the Kyokai, couldn't he? Other than that unavoidably caused by the shoku, the damage would be kept to a bare minimum."

"I see," Rokuta muttered. "But how to extend that appointment?"

"An emperor could travel across the Kyokai. That alone would result in a shoku of significant size. But it would be preferable to forcing an ordinary person across the Kyokai."

"Reckless, but not without logic."

"Indeed," Rokuta nodded. He turned to his liege. "How about you? You want to make the trip?"

Shouryuu leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. "Fine by me," he said at length, staring out the ornately latticed window. "My five-hundred year family reunion, I suppose." The sunlight streaming through the lattices played with the shadows across his face. He narrowed his eyes, shifted his stance, and looked across the room. "Youko—no, Keiki. I'm off to Sou. A good time to patch up relations. I'd like you to come with."

"To Sou?" Keiki echoed in confusion.

"We need to spread the word that Taiki has been found in Yamato and plead for more shirei. Rokuta, you go to Mt. Hou. Take Youko with you. Report on what has happened so far."

Youko understood that they were to seek further instructions from Genkun about the matter. Risai, though, cast a worried look at Shouryuu.

"Why Mt. Hou?"

"To arrange a meeting with Genkun. Taiki's condition and that of the shirei are quite out of the ordinary. There's no telling what will happen if we have to push him across the gap between *there* and *here*. We don't know if traveling across the Kyokai is permissible in the first place, or if we can go there and bring him back with us. None of these questions can be considered settled. We need Genkun's thoughts on the matter."

Shouryuu's obviously hadn't calmed Risai's concerns. "But what do shoku and Hekika Genkun have to do with each other?"

"Nothing to do with shoku specifically. Heaven has its reasons and precepts. Only Heaven can weigh the rightness or wrongness of an action. But Heaven does not touch our lives directly. The only person who can reach through that window is Genkun. I appreciate the good work Ren Taiho has put in so far, and if she would continue—"

"Wait a second!" Risai raised her voice. "You mean to ascertain the Will of Heaven through Genkun?"

"That would be the gist of it."

"But—but—is there a Heaven?"

Shouryuu nodded.

Risai felt as if some creature were assailing her from behind. "There's a Heaven? But—then why has Heaven abandoned Tai?"

"Risai."

"If there is a Heaven, if there is a Divine Will, if the gods exist, then why didn't they come to the aid of Tai faster, before all this happened? The people of Tai send their prayers to Heaven while choking on their own blood and tears."

Terrified to be seen by Asen, wrapped in darkness, they stood before the shrine in the still of the night. Forbidden to even mention the emperor's name, they instead placed a keihaku flower upon the altar. Surviving the destruction and the deepening winters became more difficult with every passing year. Amidst poverty so dire that a single fruit could make the difference between life and death, a meager offering and single stick of incense had to bear the infinite weight of their pleas.

"Not able to do anything for themselves, the people earnestly visit the shrines. And yet, as Heaven would do nothing to save them, I sought out the Imperial Kei bearing sin in my heart. If Heaven and its gods had shown us the merest glimmer of hope, I would not have crossed the sea and lost my arm in the process."

"And you saying so changes nothing."

"But—" Risai started to say. She faced Shouryuu and stated coldly, "Send me as well."

“We have no time to dawdle. You need to watch your health.”

“I am healed enough,” Risai shot back.

“Can you ride a kijuu with one arm?”

“If it’s Hien, yes, I can ride.”

“Is this creature a kijuu?”

“Hien is a *tenba* pegasus.”

“A tenba certainly is no slowpoke. But can you fly all the way to Mt. Hou? This will be a non-stop journey.”

“All the same to me.”

“In that case—” Shouryuu said to Risai. “Go there if you wish. This matter concerns Tai and Tai alone. Go and seize the Will of Heaven in your hand.”

# Chapter 40

[6-3] Having caught a few winks of sleep, Risa and the others left Kinpa Palace in the early morning light. They spared no time loitering around Ryou'un Mountain, gulped down their breakfast, and set off across the Sea of Clouds toward Mt. Hou.

Three days after leaving Gyouten, the peaks of the Adamantine Mountains encircling the Yellow Sea came into view. Having barely slept in the meantime, it became clear that Risai was slowing down their progress. As accustomed as she and Hien were to each other, riding a kijuu at full speed with only one arm was harder than she had anticipated. Nor was Hien as fast as the suguu that Youko and Rokuta rode.

Nevertheless, it was equally true that, if not for Hien, Risai never could have made the trip in the first place. At times like this, the sense of loss to which she had resolved herself again weighed heavily on her mind.

Youko and Rokuta silently urged her on, and the next day they finally arrived at Mt. Hou. *At last*, Risai said to herself, at the same time thinking, *That was easier than I'd imagined.*

She had once crossed the Yellow Sea on foot to Mt. Hou. Thinking back on how arduous that experience had been, she was struck by the difference. Flying above the Sea of Clouds made things so much more straightforward. Thinking about the price Heaven extracted from people going on the Shouzan, she couldn't help but taste the bitterness in her mouth.

It only deepened when she saw the woman standing in front of the white temple palace. According to Youko, even without being informed, Gyokuyou somehow sensed when visitors were arriving.

After Enki filled in Gyokuyou about the circumstances surrounding their trip, she instructed that they be given a place to rest and then left. They descended

Mt. Hou through the red lacquer doors, and were given the use of a palace. Making herself at home along with Youko, Risai suddenly burst into tears.

"Risai? What's wrong? Are you feeling okay?"

Risai shook her head. She didn't understand why, but she couldn't stop weeping. "Genkun remembered who I was."

"Ah," came Youko's bewildered voice. When Enki told Gyokuyou that Risai was from Tai, she had immediately surmised that Risai had been among those making the Shouzan.

"But how can that be? I've never met her!"

"Risai—"

"Gyokuyou knew I was here without anybody telling her so in advance. She knew who I was when we had never met. Why is that?"

Youko gave Risai a distressed look as she stroked her back.

"If she can see all and anticipate everything, then she ought to know what is going on in Tai as well!"

"But Risai, Tai is very far away."

Youko spoke without great conviction. Risai shook her head violently. "Once before I crossed the Yellow Sea before on the Shouzan. Does her Highness understand what that journey is like?"

"No, I don't."

"A sterile land where the youma are as thick as thieves. The people going on the Shouzan band together and set off with Mt. Hou in their sights. Many of my fellow travelers perished along the way. With no roads and no resting places, it could only be called a wasteland. We made the crossing risking life and limb, youma stalking every fearful step. What took almost two months I crossed in a single day. Above the Sea of Clouds, that's all it amounted to."

Youko only looked into her eyes and listened to what she had to say.

"The people going on the Shouzan travel to Mt. Hou in order to ascertain the Divine Will. Why? Because the kirin are here? If meeting the kirin was all that

mattered, then why not fly here above the Sea of Clouds? Then everybody could meet with the kirin without risking their lives.”

“Yes, I see.”

“Because of the necessity of crossing the Yellow Sea, everybody thinks twice before setting forth. And once having ventured in, getting out again is not easy. The journey becomes a marathon. There and back could be a four-day trip. The people could make the Shouzan so much easier. Choosing the next emperor would be so much easier. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, it would be,” Youko agreed.

“It’s said that Heaven looks into the hearts of the people and chooses the best person to receive the Mandate of Heaven. It never crossed my mind to question that. But does Heaven really exist? That’s the question that first raised doubts in my mind. How exactly does it work? Genkun divines our arrival and recalls the faces of people who went on the Shouzan, whom she has never met. And with those same miraculous powers, Heaven foresees who should be emperor. Is that it? But couldn’t Heaven do the same without the Shouzan? Why must we risk our lives crossing the Yellow Sea? What do we do it for?”

Youko furrowed her brows. It was indeed a paradox.

“If meeting with the kirin and ascertaining the Will of Heaven was the only way to chose an emperor, the cost would be high. But considering the good of the people, one worth the trade-off. If that is not the case, though, then what is the sense of it all? What good was served by those who died in the Yellow Sea?”

*How am I supposed to know?* Youko couldn’t help thinking to herself. There was no denying the point she was making. If Heaven could discern the hearts of the people beforehand and pick from among them the purest heart, there would be no need for the Shouzan.

If that *wasn’t* the case—if only through the eyes of the kirin could the right person be chosen to be emperor—then what about cases such as her own? Knowing nothing of this world, an ordinary high school student had been born as a taika. Yet the Mandate of Heaven had fallen upon her shoulders. According to Keiki, he’d sensed in her a “divine right” to rule. But perhaps “imperial” persons were so predestined beforehand, and that divine right did not suddenly arise.

"For Heaven to unreasonably demand such a heavy cost and then to offer those so chosen no assistance—what failing on Gyousou's part deserved such a fate? Of course, no emperor can be said to rule without making mistakes. Perhaps Heaven has a reason for turning its back. But then why condone Asen's existence? He rains death and destruction on the people. Why not help the true emperor and strike down the pretender?"

"Risai—"

"What are we—what are emperors and empresses—to Heaven?"

*The Garden of the Gods*, Youko suddenly thought with a start. Maybe that's what this was all about. Tentei was the overseer of the realm of this world. Tentei sat upon his throne in Heaven. Youko chose the Rikkan. By entering the name of the officials and ministers upon the Registry of Wizards, she raised them to the status of the divine. She appointed the wizardesses.

Struck by the thought, she felt her mind reel. In which case, Risai's cry was the cry of the people. Youko had once heard a similar cry in a town in Kei.

"Risai, I don't know how to answer your questions. But there is one thing that I do know."

"One thing you know?"

"If there is a Heaven, it is not infallible. A Heaven that does not exist cannot err. But a Heaven that does most certainly can."

A surprised and curious look came to Risai's face.

"If Heaven has no concrete existence, then there could be no expectation that it could do anything to save us. But if it was up to Heaven alone to save us, then it would certainly err."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that only we can save ourselves, Risai."

# Chapter 41

[6-4] Said the woman who dwelt in the space between the human and the divine, “I think Taiki has lost his horn.”

“What does that mean?” asked Rokuta. “What are the implications?”

Gyoukuyou drew her brows together. “Think of the horn as that which makes a kirin a kirin. A kirin is a Janus creature. Kirin do not change into people, and people do not become kirin. Rather, they possess both attributes within themselves. However, Taiki no longer possesses a horn. He’s lost that attribute of himself. Perhaps he has now sealed it inside himself.”

“And the human aspect that remains?”

“As the En Taihou has observed, he could be said to be a mere human. He cannot change, trigger shoku, and hear the will of Heaven. Because some shirei had already attached themselves to him, they will not be lost. However, he won’t be able to enlist new shirei.”

“Can he be brought back with us?”

“An ordinary human cannot be brought back through an ordinary shoku. There are times when humans are caught up in a shoku and swept here. But those are unpredictable events and cannot be willed to occur. If nearby, the odds of being caught up are high, but there’s no guarantee that the person involved will be transported across the Kyokai.”

“Is there no sure method then?”

“No,” Gyoukuyou answered in a subdued voice. “Shoku are not within the control of Divine Providence. Heaven cannot cause shoku to occur, and Heaven cannot prevent them from happening. If Heaven could, then Taiki’s taika would not have been swept away to Yamato in the first place.”

“That is indeed true,” Rokuta sighed. “But what about this? An emperor

crosses the Kyokai and inducts Taiki into the Registry of Wizards.”

“Even if he is appointed a wizard, only a wizard above the rank of count can cross the Kyokai. As I explained previously, there is no provision for creating new positions at that level.”

“Then what? Taiki is over there! The lives of the people of Tai depend on Taiki, and the emperor being at his side. Are you telling us to simply cast him aside?”

Gyokuyou sighed deeply. “Taiki does not have his horn. That instrument has already been sealed inside him. Cut off from the ley lines that carry the life force of the universe, a kirin cannot be expected to live long. That is the opinion of my superiors. They will wait while the situation corrects itself.”

Risai had remained quiet up to that point. She leapt to her feet. “You mean you’re going to wait for him to die!”

Gyoukuyou averted her eyes.

“Who are these *superiors* of yours in the first place?”

“Well—”

“Are you talking about Tentei and the rest of the gods? These same gods telling us to govern our kingdoms with humanity and according to the Way are telling us to wait for Taiki to die and a new taika to grow and choose a new emperor?”

Gyokuyou didn’t answer.

“And what becomes of Taiki? What sin did he commit? What about the Imperial Tai? Isn’t he the emperor that Taiki chose, according to the very will of Tentei? You charge him with no sin yet sentence him to death. And what becomes of those left behind? The people of Tai have suffered six years under Asen’s yoke. And you’re telling them to wait for Taiki to die as well? Wait for a new taika to spring forth? Wait for a new emperor to be chosen? How many more years is that going to take?”

“That—”

“Five years? Ten years? Genkun, Tai will not endure that long. Or perhaps until the next emperor is crowned, Heaven could drive the youma from Tai and warm

the winters?"

"Risai—" Enki tugged on Risai's arm. Risai shook her arm free.

"Doesn't Tentei tell the emperor to rule with humanity according to the Way? That's supposed to be the first of the Divine Decrees. And yet how can these Divine Ones spurn the Way? How can these personages, who so easily abandon the people and trample humanity underfoot, judge emperors who have strayed from the Way?"

Gyokuyou took a deep breath and slowly let it out. "Heaven has a logic and reason of its own. All those who dwell in Gyokkei follow its precepts."

"So take me to this Gyokkei or wherever. I shall petition Tentei and the gods in person."

"That is not possible. Risai, we do have pity on Taiki."

"Then please help him!"

Gyoukuyou looked at Risai with distressed eyes. "And if Taiki is returned here, then what? His shirei have lost their grip on reason. If they stay attached to Taiki in that state, they will wreak the destruction that youma wreak. If he could be brought back, the shirei would have to be separated from him. If he loses his shirei, then how could he protect himself? He would lose as well his imperial sense. He would have no other means of finding the emperor."

"Even so, as the Taiho, he is necessary to Tai."

"The rest of the kingdoms cannot save Tai. They cannot muster their armies and attack Asen. Bring Taiki home and he would be as helpless as a lamb. Your desire to save Tai, your conviction that Tai must be saved, can only prove a Sisyphean effort with our hands so tied. What would such a Pyrrhic victory yield him? What can a kirin accomplish when it is incapable of changing form, and with no shirei at his command? Besides being cut down before your eyes?"

"If he has no shirei then I shall protect him, at the cost of my life. I know I am no substitute for the shirei. Yet the people of Tai are waiting for their Taiho. If he lives, they can rally behind him. I might not amount to much with my one arm, but the people of Tai will rally together to protect him."



"And that's how you intend to attack Asen? If adding a useless Taiki to your ranks could make such a difference, should you not have already done so?"

"How can a person like you stand there and spout such nonsense?"

"Risai."

"What can the Taiho do—how could you even ask such a question? The Taiho is a kirin. He's not going to attack Asen. He's not going to man the barricades in any battle. Nevertheless, the Taiho *is* necessary. Don't you understand? Whether or not the Taiho is there—that is what will make all the difference in the world to me, and to the people of Tai."

"Well—"

"The Taiho is our hope, Genkun. A Tai without the Taiho and the emperor is a kingdom where the sun never rises. What he will do or can or cannot do is not the question. Before the people of Tai can again begin to hope, they must know that the Taiho lives."

Gyokuyou stared off into space, gazing at the band of light streaming through a crevice in the deformed outcropping of stones, as if pushing that rock up the mountain herself.

"Enki—"

"Yes."

"Who among your Sankou could you send on a temporary sabbatical?"

"Temporary—"

"We'll transfer Taiki's koseki to En. Taiki has never been officially registered, but simply to conform with formalities, he can be listed as a refugee from Tai. Once his records are in order, dispatch the Imperial En and have him induct Taiki into the Registry of Wizards."

"Can a kirin be made a citizen of En?"

"Nothing says he cannot. While a kirin is not listed upon the census of his own kingdom, the law does not touch upon kirin from other kingdoms. The same thing applies to the Sankou. Though members of the Sankou must be citizens of that kingdom, no such restriction applies to a kirin from another kingdom."

“Genkun—” Risai cried with great joy.

Gyokuyou didn’t look at her. “I haven’t done anything you should thank me for. Even bringing Taiki back here will solve nothing.”

“And Taiki?” Youko interjected. “Is losing his horn a permanent condition?”

“It depends. Without seeing him first, it would be impossible to say. Once you have retrieved him, bring him here and we will do whatever we can to help him recover. In any case, he must be separated from his shirei. Be sure to bring them back as well.”

“I understand.”

Gyokuyou nodded, and now looked at Risai. “Heaven has its reasons and its precepts, and no one may disturb their foundations. It does no good to argue necessity or expediency. There are reasons for everything and all is built upon that foundation. Heaven itself lies within the web of the Law and cannot condone any outrage perpetrated against the people. In that respect, Heaven and Earth differ not at all. Do not doubt that for a second.”

Risai said nothing, but only bowed her head.

# Chapter 42

[6-5] The news Risai had been waiting for so anxiously arrived the day they came back from Mt. Hou. Renrin rushed into Ransetsu Hall, threw off the Koseisan and called out, “Risai, he’s there!”

Risai froze with shock. Hearing this long-awaited news awakened in her more fear than joy, rooting her body to the spot.

“The shirei discovered Taiki. Gouran and Sanshi are definitely with him.”

Risai pressed her hand against her chest and groaned in relief. She raised her head. “How is he faring?”

“He appears to be unharmed. When I got there, he had already left. But I was able to follow his trail. He resides inside that building. I left shirei to watch, so we shouldn’t lose track of him again.”

Risai looked up at the heavens. Strangely, she felt expressions of thanks welling up inside her. Indeed, if Heaven existed, then Heaven must be imperfect. Heaven must make mistakes. But those mistakes too could be amended. A Heaven that could not err could never correct itself.

Hanrin asked, “What do we do next? Will Shouryuu go to see him?”

An emperor was not a magical being by nature, and could not pass through the Gogoukanda. Even though called a god, he remained in essence a man.

“No matter what path we choose, Taiki will be with him. The Gogou Gate will have to open.”

“That will produce a large shoku.”

“Unfortunately unavoidably,” Shouryuu mumbled mostly to himself. “We’ll use as many shirei as we can muster and try to limit the collateral damage as much as possible. Though there’s no way to say how much we can accomplish. At any

rate, we've asked the Imperial Sou, and those three kingdoms will be sending us their shirei. We'll multiply their forces as much as possible and do what we can."

Hanrin nodded.

"And when?" asked the Imperial Han.

Shouryuu said shortly, "Tomorrow."

Where the gate would open was carefully investigated. At the far reaches of the Kyokai would be best. As far away from dry land as possible. But even distance did not guarantee that the bad effects of the shoku could be avoided. Such was the nature of the beast.

Rokuta said, "In cases like this, we really do close our eyes and trust to fate." He summoned his shirei. Kijuu could not cross the Kyokai. The shirei would bear Shouryuu.

"Rikaku, I entrust him to you."

Accompanied by Hankyo, whom he'd borrowed from Keiki, the two fastest youma would travel half a day, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the land. The shirei would follow after them, traveling invisibly through the ley lines.

Rokuta saw them off from the balcony of Seikou Manor. He let out a long breath. He'd split up with Youko and Risai at Mt. Hou and returned directly to En. He'd put the paperwork in order as Gyokuyou had instructed. With the Imperial Seal in hand, he'd arrived back in Kei this morning. All the groundwork had been laid.

"Good job."

He was resting his chin against the handrail. He turned around to find Youko there behind him.

"I haven't worked this hard for quite a while. You okay, Youko? Taking time away from your official duties?"

"At any rate, I'm not in much of a mood to work today. Koukan said I was there in body but not in spirit and kicked me out."

"You don't say?"

"Well, I did do the same thing to Keiki earlier."

Rokuta laughed. "But of course. Keiki's really got a soft spot for the kid. Carries on like he's his little brother. He really took him under his wing."

This news caught Youko off guard. "That's a bit unusual, isn't it?"

"Way unusual," said Rokuta, and they both laughed.

That was about the time a flustered Hanrin came running up. Rokuta turned to her casually, but knew from one look at her face that something bad had happened.

"What's up?"

"Renrin went to check on his condition. She says that Taiki doesn't remember us at all."

"Unbelievable," Rokuta muttered, running back to Ransetsu Hall.

Renrin and Keiki looked at their wit's end. Risai stood there like a ramrod.

"Renrin—"

"En Taiho, Taiki is—"

"You met with him? What do you mean, he can't remember?"

Renrin shook her head. Her face was pale.

"Taiki is in that bad of a state?"

"He definitely is. But he is safe. By which I mean he is still alive. But he doesn't remember anything about this world. Or what kind of being he is. What shirei are or what happened to him."

"Damn," Enki blurted out. "His horn. Does he still have a horn?"

"This may be because he doesn't have a horn. What should we do next, En Taiho?"

"We'll do whatever has to be done."

Whether or not he still remembered, they couldn't leave him there. In his current state, none of them knew how much longer he would last. To make matters worse, his shirei were still with him and they were almost out of control.

If abandoned, sooner or later all hell would break loose. Nobody could begin to imagine what Toutetsu would do if no longer bound.

"Has word been relayed to Shouryuu?"

"I will," said Hanrin. "The remaining shirei will track him down. Using the tonkou, they should overtake him quickly."

"Good," Enki said to himself. "In any case, Taiki must be returned to this world. He may not agree at first, but if force is required then force must be used. After that—who's to say? Perhaps once his horn has healed, it will all come back to him."

Enki turned to Risai. "Is that okay with you? Do you have any objections?"

"I concur," Risai said, her face pale and drawn.

# Chapter 43

[6-6] Late that night, beneath the light of the Moon, somewhere on the seas surrounding the kingdom of Yamato, the surface of the ocean was behaving bizarrely.

No sign of land could be seen in any direction. The strangely flat surface reached out to the horizon. There were no boats—not a living thing—in sight, only the moonlight shimmering like a white stone.

Slight perturbations like wrinkles in a bolt of cloth cut across the water's surface, interrupting the Moon's reflection. The reflection warped and shattered, suddenly growing, and then tracing a perfect circle in light.

In the center of that circle of light, shadows danced below the water's surface. The countless shadows soared up into the heavens and abruptly stopped. The Moon's reflection beneath them thinned and began to return to its original form.

All at once, its shape was broken by the waves. The psychic streams tossed and turned, changing into violent currents in the air. The raging billows churned the ocean into a sea of foam.

The shirei headed toward the far shore. Those youma divided in number by the Kouyoukyou, joined the youma recruited from the Yellow Sea, and grew to unprecedented numbers. They stealthily advanced upon the shores and there raised their voices.

Amidst the howling gale came the cry, *We are here*, further beckoning the surging winds.

The voices of those being summoned to these shores—and the voices beckoning them there—were caught up in the sound of the wind swirling over the coastline.

At long last, a single shadow on the shore called out to a single equine shadow galloping across the raging surface of the sea.

He had wandered to this shore. And now he realized that all those voices in the wind and rain were calling out to *him*. Their voices sought out the essence of the long-sealed beast inside and resounded within him.

He did not understand what they were saying.

He did not understand why they were beckoning to him.

But he said, *come*.

And on they came.

The heavy lid that had long sealed his true nature began to stir.

Miraculously enough, the invisible golden strands left behind by those searching for him had set it in motion. Without intending to, wandering to and fro in their quest, their tracks had spun around him a spider's web of golden silk. The golden currents of the life force infused the ink-black shadows of his existence.

Wrenching the cage further open were his searchers. Renrin had observed him finding his way along the shore. She could not say herself what motivated her to remove the Koseisan and transform before him. Having met him once before, perhaps she felt emboldened to appeal to him in person.

Perhaps she wanted to entreat with him: *You are a kirin.*

She had no idea how he would interpret this gesture. Though being named a kirin, he would not be aware of it himself, or comprehend what sort of a creature a kirin was, or that he was being returned to Mt. Hou in human form. He would not remember the first time when, with Keiki's help, he had embraced the truth about himself and transformed.

The transformation that symbolized the completion of the journey from "himself" to "Taiki."

When Renrin departed, trailing the golden threads behind her, he remembered.

He remembered he was Taiki. He remembered Tai. And his Emperor.

The wind and rain pounded against the dark shore, as if sweeping the equine silhouette from *there* to *here*, driving it down to the broad expanse of the gray beach.

Amidst the breaking waves, falling on them like a small rain of hail, the one shadow stood rooted at the water's edge.

Astride Rikaku's back, Shouryuu looked down at the shadow. The shadow looked up at Shouryuu.

"Taiki?"

The boy clearly trembled. He didn't know this man by his taika visage, that which had been bestowed by the place of his birth on this side of the Kyokai. And even if Taiki could remember the world *over there*, it was unlikely that he would have recognized Shouryuu in his current state.

By the same token, neither would Shouryuu know Taiki on sight. Except that the damp, wind-tossed hair reflecting the dark light brought to Shouryuu's mind this person's unique characteristics. Those jet-black eyes that spoke of an inner resilient strength, the bent bow returning to its true form.

"Do you understand if I call you Taiki?"

He nodded silently.

Seated upon Rikaku's back, not waiting for a response, Shouryuu reached out and placed his hand upon his head. "According to the authority invested in me as Emperor of En, I appoint thee Taishi."

As soon as he spoke those words, the boy closed his eyes and fell back a step. Shouryuu grasped the arms reached up to the sky and hauled him onto Rikaku's back, in the same motion jumping off himself, slapping the beast on the flanks.

"Go!"

Rikaku spun around, cut like a knife through the swirling winds, and took off like a shot, leaving the wave-swept shore behind.

Shouryuu watched them leave. Hankyo nudged at his heels. He climbed onto Hankyo's back, glancing over his shoulder as the fleet-footed beast soared into the sky.

The coastline turned away the battering waves like so many splashes in a pond. Past the coastline, the city reached out and out and out. His people, his country, everybody he knew no longer existed. Japan—Yamato—was a foreign nation to him now.

His native land and the people of his youth sank into the mists of time. He nodded once, acknowledging the strange new world that appeared before his eyes.

And so he buried his past, his country and his kin. This had become, in a sense, his final and long-delayed funeral.

Clouds gathered from the east. The winds rose, scouring the peaks of Mt. Gyouten. A black spot appeared on the lead-colored clouds. Unconsciously, Rokuta rose to the tips of his toes. A second black dot appeared beside it. The winds swept them through the sky at such a speed they seemed on a collision course with the mountains ridges.

They traced an arc around the back of the wide terrace and then swooped down and landed. The assembled crowd ran up to the pair of youma, each bearing a figure of a person on its back. The one glanced over his shoulder at them. The other slipped off the shirei's back and fell prostrate on the ground.

Keiki impulsively scrambled ahead of Rokuta and then abruptly held up. Rokuta as well skidded to a stop and groaned aloud.

The figure on the white cobblestones appeared younger than he should be at his present age. There was hardly a spark of vitality left in his ashen face and tightly-closed eyes. The color of his complexion suggested profound debilitation. The steel-colored hair lying against the stones appeared distressingly short to Keiki and the others. The arms thrown out at his sides were sickly, pallid, and thin.

As much as they wanted to draw nearer, the overpowering stench of death held them back.

*"That's our little pipsqueak?"*

Rokuta took a step backwards. Keiki as well had no choice but to retreat.

A deep and profoundly evil spell coiled around Taiki, pushing Keiki and the rest

of them backwards like a force field. Like the curse of death congealed, the bloody, bilious scent was invisible to their eyes but overpowering in its presence.

"What could have brought him to such a state?" Rokuta wondered.

As if overwhelmed by the situation before him, he took several more steps backward. Keiki seemed to hold his ground, but could not resolve to approach any closer.

Keiki glanced back over his shoulder and nodded to Youko, who marched through that invisible wall. Risai stumbled after her.

"What is going on?" cried out Hanrin, clinging to the Imperial Han. "Such impurities cannot be the stain of blood! This must be the curse of malice and bitterness directed at Taiki himself!"

# Chapter 44

[6-7] Taiki was immediately flown to Mt. Hou. Gyokuyou was waiting for them at the gates. She examined the figure borne down to her.

“What happened—” she began to ask, and could say no more.

“Can we cure him?” Risai implored.

According to Shouryuu, Taiki had walked about under his own power in Yamato, and had managed to ride on Rikaku’s back from *there* to *here*. But ever since then he hadn’t opened his eyes once.

Carried down by the wizardesses according to Gyokuyou’s orders, his face was still an ashen gray. He seemed to have slipped into a deep sleep.

Gyokuyou knelt and gazed down upon the emaciated face, her own features drawn with pain. “Impurities have compromised his horn. Nevertheless, however imperfect, he still wears the titles of the Black Kirin.”

She raised her head and looked at Risai, Youko, and Shouryuu. They had accompanied Taiki here, the kirin being unable to abide his presence.

“This is not something we can address. Our only hope is to rely on the good offices of the Queen Mother.”

All three of them looked back at her. “The Queen Mother?” Risai asked. “You mean the Queen Mother of the West?”

Gyokuyou nodded. “It is possible the Queen Mother will know of a way to help him.”

“The Queen Mother of the West really exists?”

“Of course she does. This way.”

Gyokuyou made her way to a shrine. Youko and Shouryuu had stepped into its precincts once before. Only the statues of the Queen Mother and Tentei rested

upon the altar inside the shrine. The altar was carved with numerous patterns and motifs. A stone statue sat on a silver throne set against a pair of burnished silver screens. Pearl curtains strung between the four pillars hid the statue up to its chest.

Gyokuyou bowed to the statue and continued towards the back. Two doors—right and left—graced the wall behind the altar. Gyokuyou knocked on the door on the left. She waited several long moments. At length, from the door came the ringing sound of two stone disks being struck together.

She opened the door. Considering the size of the court, there should not be much else beyond that door. But deeper in were still more pavilions.

Urged on by Gyokuyou, Youko passed through the door.

Inside was a temple that was not a temple. The expansive white floor resembled that of the court. In the center was the same altar and the same throne. Except the pearl curtain had been raised.

The two rooms seemed to be copies of each other. But here there was no ceiling. No inner walls. The pure white pillars forming the wall behind the throne in fact formed a huge waterfall descending out of infinity, shrouded in mist and fog. Looking up, all that could be discerned were white rays of light shining from a great distance.

On one side of the throne, bathed in the clean, white light, stood a woman. Following Gyokuyou's example and kneeling in respect, Youko and the others understood that this was the Queen Mother of the West.

Even Shouryuu had never seen her before. True gods did not mingle with those of the world below. The other two had never been convinced that the Goddess actually existed.

The beauty of Hekika Genkun's countenance was acknowledged by one and all. Compared to her, the Queen Mother of the West appeared—not ugly—but surprisingly plain.

The wizardesses bearing Taiki laid him at her feet. Casting her eyes upon him, the Queen Mother calmly sat, not stirring a muscle.

"A horrid sight." Her voice was flat, almost mechanical.

Gyokuyou bowed deeply. “As you have observed, this is more than our poor, unworthy hands can handle. We wish to rely upon the Queen Mother and her powers.”

“He comes here loathed and cursed. I have never before beheld such a self-damned and despised kirin.”

Her words suggested not a glimmer of pity, perhaps because the silently falling curtain of water absorbed any lilt or intonation in her voice.

“The shirei have lost the Way and run wild. This is due to no fault of the kirin himself. He has lost his horn, fallen ill, and does not have the strength to discipline the raging shirei within him.”

“Leave the shirei to me. I shall exorcize them.”

“And Taiki?”

Silence fell upon their group. The woman grew still. She appeared to Risai little changed from her stone statue. Nothing moved except for the falling water and rising mist behind her. It looked like a cascading river of fine powder, crystal dust dancing in the wind.

“Please do not cast him aside,” said Risai.

The only evidence of a reaction on the part of the Queen Mother was a slight arch of her eyebrows.

“He is necessary to Tai.”

“Even if cured, there is nothing he can do. Do you intend to defeat your enemies with that body of yours?” She spoke without a spark of compassion.

Risai grasped the shoulder of her missing right arm. “No.”

“Taiki is much like you. There is nothing more he can do.”

“He still matters, nonetheless.”

“For what purpose?”

“To save Tai.”

“Why do you pray for the salvation of Tai?”

Risai found herself at a loss for words. “The—the answer to that question should go without saying.”

“Without saying?”

Risai opened her mouth, but found she had nothing to say. Why was she so driven to save Tai in the first place?

“Do you love Taiki and the Imperial Tai? Do you love the Imperial Court in which you served?”

*That is true as well,* Risai thought. She revered Gyousou and adored Taiki. She was proud of the fact that they had taken her into their confidence and appointed her to a position of trust. She loved that place where she was treated as “one of the team.”

But even Risai understood—what was gone could never be restored as it once was. She had lost many of her own subordinates, and many of the court officials she trusted. The last she’d heard, the disposition of Taisai Kaihaku of the Ministry of Heaven remained unknown. The word was that Chousai Eichuu had died from his wounds. The rumors also said that Ministers Senkaku of the Ministry of Earth and Haboku of the Ministry of Summer had been executed. She had no idea what had happened after she’d parted with Kaei in Sui Province, and was too frightened to pursue the matter any further.

All these people dead and gone in under six years of time. Risai looked down at the feet of the Queen Mother where Taiki lay. He was no longer the child she once knew. That young Taiki no longer existed either.

“Or you simply cannot forgive Asen?”

Of course she couldn’t forgive Asen. He’d gained Taiki’s trust and then used it to attack him. He had stolen the throne. He had driven Tai into the depths of hell. So many had lost their lives because of him. There was no way such inhumanity could ever be forgiven. That Asen could be permitted to remain upon the throne was a flat repudiation of morality and good sense, charity and good faith—of everything that human beings should hold dear.

“You want to clear your good name? Or is this out of love for Tai?”

Risai couldn’t answer. Neither one seemed the right answer. “I don’t know.”

"So you stamp your feet and carry on like an unreasonable child about how much everything upsets you."

Neither was that a satisfactory explanation. Risai lifted her gaze. The white expanse of space reminded her—however painfully—of Tai's snow-swept landscapes. The countless snowflakes blanketing the mountains and fields and villages. Every sound deadened and subdued. Beneath the silent shroud, the world falling into a kind of paralyzed hibernation.

Yes, Risai felt the sting of her muddied reputation. Yes, she was furious at Asen for doing so, and had sworn revenge upon him for trampling all that was good and right beneath his feet. Yes, she had very much resolved herself that if Heaven would not straighten his crooked paths, then she would.

Waiting for the opportunity while roaming about Jou Province, Risai had lost many friends and acquaintances. After suffering so many wounds, she had come to believe that only in overthrowing Asen could she hope for any hope of healing.

And yet with each passing winter, the snow had frozen all those thoughts out of her.

"I don't even know for certain myself." She followed the billowing mists from the waterfall with her eyes. It resembled the smoke arising from the ruins. "Except that Tai will be destroyed if things continue as they are."

"And its destruction is unacceptable to you?"

"Yes. That alone I cannot bear."

"Why?"

*Why*, Risai thought to herself. The first thing that came out of her mouth was the last thing she expected to say. "Because if Tai falls, it will be my fault."

"Your fault?"

"I don't know how to say it. But that's the way I feel." Of course, the ruin of Tai was not something Risai could have done. "If Tai is destroyed, so much shall be lost to me. The kingdom I love. Its realms and territories. Its people. And every memory tied to them. *Everything*. But I sense I shall lose something even greater than all that. Before longing for what is lost and weeping for what I no longer

have, I shall loath what I have become and curse my fate.”

She took a breath and let it out. “You’re right. I may be acting like a querulous child. At the end of the day, I was willing claw my way out of there in order to escape that pain. Simply in order to preserve the sanctity of my own mind.”

Risai looked at Taiki and then turned her gaze to the altar. “This is not something I am hoping the Taiho will give me. I’m not looking for any miracles. If the gods—who could perform such a miracle—are not going to save Tai, how could I expect the Taiho to do so?”

The Goddess raised an eyebrow.

“However, light must be brought to Tai. Lacking that, Tai will truly freeze over and the death and destruction will only continue.”

The Queen Mother said nothing. Her face expressed nothing. In her eyes was reflected a universe of nothing. At last, her eyes fell on Taiki.

“I will exorcize this sickness from him. I promise nothing else.” Almost mechanically, she raised her hand. “You may leave now. And take him with you.”

As soon as she spoke, a roaring sound resonated and the waterfall surrounded the throne, swallowing it up in the mist. Before Risai could raise her voice in alarm, she had stumbled backwards, closing her eyes reflexively. Gathering her wits about her, she realized she was at the back of the wide court, standing on the white cobblestones.

The empty expanse of cobblestones reached out to the foothills of the verdant mountains. The quiet sound of the waves from the Sea of Clouds drifted in.

Risai looked around in confusion, at the wizardesses gathered around Taiki, at the dumbfounded Youko and Shouryuu. Gyokuyou alone knelt on the cobblestones. After bowing deeply, she got to her feet and glanced over her shoulder at Risai.

“You may take him back with you. Taiki will sleep for a while, but as the Queen Mother promised, he will most definitely be cured of this sickness.”

Risai looked back at Gyokuyou. Her noble features reminded her of the sad visage of the young woman she had parted with so long ago in Gyousou’s home

province of I.

“That is all?”

Gyokuyou nodded wordlessly.



## Part Seven

### Chapter 45

[7-1] The emperor and kirin of Han were waiting for them when they got back to Kei.

Enkyuu palace was converted into Taiki's recovery room. Taiki continued to slumber after being brought back from Mt. Hou. But now Enki and Keiki and the other kirin were able to approach him.

Having confirmed this for herself, with a great relief, Renrin as well would be returning to Ren.

"You won't be coming to see him?" Risai inquired.

Preparing for her journey home, Renrin shook her head. "I have seen his face. I know he will be okay. With no other compelling reason to stay, I must be about my kingdom's business."

"But—" Risai was about to say, and hung her head instead. Holed up in Kinpa Palace, Renrin had been spending time in the search for Taiki she should have been devoting to her own people. Risai had essentially stolen Ren's Taiho from Ren. She couldn't continue to detain her for mere sentimental reasons.

Renrin smiled. "With things getting back to normal, I'm starting to miss my liege. And if I don't get back right away, he's going to get anxious too. We don't want to be out of each other's sight any longer than necessary."

Risai amiably agreed, and saw her off with a deep bow. The next day, Shouryuu returned to En, leaving Enki behind. The first hints of fall began stealing into the quiet West Gardens.

Risai stayed by Taiki's side. If there was anything she couldn't handle, Keikei was there to pick up the slack.

"He still hasn't opened his eyes," Keikei said rather grumpily. He always brought a sprig of bush clover with him so that would be the first thing Taiki saw

when he woke up.

"His color looks a lot better."

"Yes, it does. The Tai Taiho is a kirin and yet he doesn't have golden hair."

"That's why he's called the Black Kirin."

"I thought his hair turned this color because of his illness. Youko said that wasn't the case."

"That's the way he came into this world," Risai said with a smile.

"I thought the Tai Taiho was smaller."

"He grew up. The last time I saw him before now was six years ago."

The kirin sleeping there was no longer a child. She couldn't say it didn't leave her somewhat discomfited. The young Taiki had not returned to her. Those six years had been swept away and would never return.

"It must have been a tough place where he was those six years."

"Tough?"

"I mean, that would explain why he got sick."

"Indeed. That may well be the case."

"It's good to have him back, though."

"Yes," Risai answered.

Taiki's eyelashes faintly fluttered.

"Taiki?"

Keikei leaned forward to get a better look. Taiki opened his eyes, sending him stumbling backward in surprise.

"Keikei, go tell Youko."

Keikei dashed out of the room with a liveliness that stirred the petals on the bush clover next to the bed. Taiki's still dim gaze followed him out of the room.

"Are you conscious, Taiki?" Risai hovered over him and studied his face.

His wavering eyes focused on her. He blinked, as if perceiving a vision before

him.

“You’ve come back. Do you understand?”

He stared at Risai in astonishment. And then nodded. “Risai?” he said in a faint voice. Not the voice of a child. A soft, warm voice.

“Yes.” The tears coursed down her cheeks as she embraced the frail body lying beneath the quilts.

“Risai, your arm—” The arms hugging her in turn had detected her missing right limb.

“I lost it due to a bit of carelessness.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’ve never been better.”

She started to straighten herself, but Taiki’s thin arms detained her. “Risai, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she replied, though the words were likely lost in the sound of her weeping.

A junior official entered the Outer Palace during the Privy Council meeting and whispered something to Koukan. He nodded. Apologizing, he approached the dais. He said something quietly to Youko, who nodded in turn.

Koukan descended the dais, and returned to the business of the Privy Council. Youko beckoned to Keiki, standing behind her. He leaned forward with a curious look.

“Keiki,” she said quietly, “Taiki is awake.”

Keiki couldn’t keep the reaction from his eyes.

“Please go and see how he is.”

“But—” he said in a tight voice.

“It’s okay,” Youko smiled. “Go.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Keiki left the Outer Palace and headed for Enkyuu Palace. When he arrived at Taiki’s quarters, he found that Enki had already

arrived.

"Kei Taiho."

Keiki did not recognize the voice beckoning him from the bed. The face looking up at him was no more familiar to him than all the times he had come here before to study Taiki's sleeping countenance. And like all those other times, he found himself at something of a loss. He stood uncertainly by the bed.

With a grin, Rokuta left the room, leaving the two of them alone, and Keiki feeling all the more at sea.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I have put you to."

"Think nothing of it. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yes. I am deeply grateful from the bottom of my heart for all you have done for Risai and for myself."

He spoke in a quiet voice. Keiki grew more perplexed. It was logical that he should look different. But the smile that had once bubbled effortlessly to his lips, and the childlike voice that accompanied it, were gone. That small kirin was gone. That sense of loss weighed heavily on his thoughts.

"Such was not the product of my efforts, but those of Her Highness."

Keiki bowed his head. He couldn't help remembering that the empress he was serving when he first met Taiki was no longer counted among the living. That many months and years had passed between *then* and *now*.

"Is the Imperial Kei a taika?"

He must have been told something about the circumstances surrounding her coronation. "Yes. She's been looking forward to meeting you. She's currently conducting the Privy Council. She will be coming here directly."

"I see."

Keiki felt himself losing the thread of the conversation. He didn't know where to direct his attention. His gaze drifted aimlessly across the bed.

A faint voice said, "I dreamed a long and terrible dream."

Keiki came back to his senses with a start. A faint smile came to the ashen face.

"You remember, don't you? The first time we met I was a kirin who was completely incapable of doing anything."

"Ah—yes—"

"You patiently did so much on my behalf, and taught me so much, and yet I forgot all of it."

"Taiki—"

"In the midst of those painful dreams, I constantly saw visions of Houro Palace. I longed for it so badly and wanted to go there." He looked at Keiki. "I wonder if I made it in time."

"Taiki—"

"I frittered away so much time. I feel like I've lost so much. But we made it in time, didn't we? I feel there is still so much left for me to do."

"Of course," Keiki said, with as much conviction as he could muster. "That's why we brought you home. The two of us speaking here and now is testimony enough that hope remains alive. Don't worry about it."

"Yes," he said very thoughtfully, and closed his eyes.

# Chapter 46

[7-2] “Taiki?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod.

Sitting this close to him, he looked quite haggard. Nevertheless, he managed to come to a half-sitting position, and put on a brave front.

“You are the Imperial Kei?”

“My name is Youko Nakajima.”

A smile flitted across his lips. “My surname is Takasato.”

Youko took a long breath. She was seized by an unexpected sensation that left her almost flustered. “It does feel quite strange, meeting somebody from my generation in a place like this.”

“Same here. You have done so much for me. I am very grateful.”

“Nothing you need thank me for,” Youko said reluctantly, casting her eyes down. “We haven’t done anything worth being commended for. Tai still remains in the same sad straits as before.”

“I am thankful that you came to retrieve me.”

“Yes, we can both agree on that.”



Youko struggled for words. There were so many things she had planned on talking about when they met. Their old home town. This, that, and the other thing. But here Taiki was right in front of her and she couldn't think of what to say.

Their old "home town" was a country they could never return to. It had become for Youko a place entirely unrelated to her. Yet touch upon some silly topic and in that sense of poignancy still welled up inside her. The thought of being seized by homesickness and nostalgia if the conversation turned in the wrong direction frightened her.

She had the feeling that until all her friends and family still waiting for her over there had died, she wouldn't be able to talk about old times simply for old times' sake.

"I don't suppose things have changed all that much over there."

They should be doing well, all those people she once knew.

"No, not at all. The more things change, the more they stay the same."

"Indeed." *And all the better that they do.* Youko sighed and smiled. "We're currently discussing what can be done for Tai. Naturally, we're helping the refugees as best we can, and trying to come up with the means of assisting those still in the country. It'd be best to go there and help out, but that doesn't look like a possibility right now."

"I'm really thankful to you."

"No, we still haven't actually done anything for Tai, nothing that will really make a difference. Kei is still poor. We have too many refugees of our own, and we can hardly come to their aid." She added with a smile, "Still, your return is most heartening. In fact, I've been looking forward to it. So get well as quickly as possible."

"Looking forward to it?"

"Yes. I say a lot of things, but most of it seems to fly over people's heads. For example, in order to help the Tai refugees, shouldn't we open an embassy or something like it—that sort of thing. All my ministers, and the Imperial En, and Enki, thought I was nuts."

"An embassy?" Taiki said with a surprised look.

"Ah, yeah," Youko answered with a chagrined shrug. "It seems a quite reasonable suggestion to me. There ought to be an organization that speaks on behalf of the refugees. Countless refugees have washed up on the shores of Kei and En, and their disposition is left up to conditions and circumstances. But I think that it'd be a good idea if they could negotiate with the government—articulate what they needed or what kind of expectations they had. After all, I'd think refugees would know the needs of refugees better than anybody. If only in preparation for the time when a kingdom falls into disorder and starts generating refugees, I think everybody could sleep a lot easier if every kingdom had embassies in every other kingdom. But these seem such foreign concepts that nobody can grasp what I'm getting at."

Youko sighed and lifted her head. Taiki gave her a long look. "Pretty weird, huh?" she said.

"Not at all. I think the Imperial Kei is an impressive empress."

"Well, *impressive* isn't a word I would use. And could you drop the *Imperial Kei* business? Considering that we're just two normal Japanese kids, it sounds funny."

Taiki smiled. "So how old are you, Nakajima-san?"

But being addressed that way struck her a tad odd as well. "A year older than you, I think. Counting years doesn't really mean anything here." A thought occurred to her. She said, raising her voice, "How about I call you Takasato-kun?"

"I'm fine either way. I came here once before when I was young, so being called Taiki doesn't feel so strange to me."

"I see. I only came here three years ago. I guess that makes me a relative newcomer compared to you."

"The fact is, I've only been here a total of one year." The poignancy in his voice contained more pain than nostalgia.

"Well, you just may end up being my go-to guy anyway. I didn't have a particular interest in politics or social organizations when I was in high school. As

a result, all I've got to go on is some vague knowledge and ideas."

"I really don't think I'm all that different from you. I'm equally clueless about everything. I was only here a year, and half of that time I spent on Mt. Hou. I really didn't live in Tai for very long at all. Not to mention that I was a kid and didn't understand how the world worked. I sort of wandered about in a daze."

"Starting now, then, any advice you have for me would be most welcome. For the time being, I'd like you to be my representative among the Tai refugees."

"Yes," he said with a nod.

A loud commotion suddenly erupted from the room next door. "What's going on?" she heard Risai cry out.

Youko rose from her chair as the door to the room was forced open.

# Chapter 47

[7-3] Men charged into the bedroom. Youko scowled. Leading them was the Naisai, the vice-minister of the Interior, the official in the Ministry of Heaven specifically responsible for the Inner Palace. Behind him were several guards she recognized from the Forbidden Gate

“What’s going on?” She hardly needed to inquire. Their intent was obvious. They carried swords. “What is the meaning of this?” she said, glaring at the intruders.

The men raised their swords. “You are bringing shame upon Kei,” the Naisai said. “Granted, your incompetence does not match the Late Empress Yo, but you take the kingdom and the ministers too lightly. You have elevated commoners of unknown lineage and without connections, have trampled upon our customs, and scorn the dignity of the kingdom and the honor of the ministries.”

“That’s right!” chimed in one of his underlings, nervously gripping his sword, crouching there in a wary stance. “Treating hanjuu and the like the same as normal people, allowing them entrance to the court, even making one a general of the Palace Guard!”

Youko felt a flush of anger rushing to her head.

“Hanjuu and the like, eh?” Her hand reached for her own weapon, and then remembered that she hadn’t brought the Water Monkey Sword with her.

“Dragging the reputations of the ministers through the mud, installing hanjuu and rebels in the very heart of the Palace, contaminating its sacred grounds. Making light of the august court officials, elevating hanjuu and brigands above them, making them serve them. At the end of the day, you obviously cannot bear to stand in their presence and must pull everybody down with you. With hanjuu and bandits as your companions, you could divert your attention from your own weaknesses and insufficiencies. Gather emperors and Taiho from other

kingdoms and get caught up in their company, and I suppose you started to fancy yourself one of them. Your self-regard must really be something. A good thing Heaven won't tolerate your behavior forever."

Youko was at a complete loss for words. She simply gaped at him.

The Naisai spoke up instead. "That's enough." To Youko he said, "I apologize for his incivility. But understand that he is not the only one who holds such opinions. Though I would not go so far as he, I certainly cannot condone bringing foreign emperors and Saiho into the Imperial Palace on such a regular basis. Giving asylum to a general from Tai and assistance to the Tai Saiho—you seem to have forgotten you are the Empress of Kei. What purpose could you have for entertaining so many foreign dignitaries? Do you intend to hand Kei over to foreign hands?"

"You're quite wrong."

"Then why do they strut around the Inner Palace like they own the place? Who do you take the subjects of Kei for?"

"Just another woman empress, after all," the underling guard spit out. "Out to destroy the kingdom in a personal pique. If things aren't put right quickly, we'll have another Empress Yo on our hands."

By now Youko was trembling with fury, feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. A deep sense of despondency welled up inside her. Her intent was not to take the people or kingdom for granted. But arguing that she only had their best interests in mind would likely have little traction here. She could easily fume in the face of their ignorance. The problem was, looking in from the outside, the facts would have been difficult to discern. Even Youko couldn't have anticipated that any of her ministers would be carrying around this degree of resentment.

*So this is what it's come to?* was all she felt.

All anybody could have done based on her words and deeds was guess at what was going on. And arriving at a certain assessment of the facts, act on that basis. She couldn't see how she could possibly dissuade somebody who had already come to that conclusion with such certainty.

"So, long story short, you've come here to assassinate me?" When Youko

posed the question, the Naisai faltered a bit. She continued, “If that’s what this is about, well, them’s the breaks, I guess. I’d resist if I had the means to do so, but darn it all if I didn’t leave my sword back in my quarters. I guess that puts me at your mercy.”

“Stop acting like such a smart ass!”

Youko couldn’t keep a wry smile from her lips. “I don’t much care how this goes down, but I’d like to keep any additional harm from coming to the Tai Taiho and General Ryu. If you find their presence such an affront to Kei, then repatriating them should be sufficient. Tai has need of its people just as much as Kei. You may presume to diminish the suffering in our own kingdom, but you do not have the right to impose your will on the subjects of other kingdoms. So I would ask you not to add anything more to the suffering of the Tai people.”

The Naisai looked coldly back and forth between Youko and Taiki. “In the midst of chaos in Tai, they abandoned their kingdom and sought refuge in Kei. I can’t see it as a great loss to lose a Taiho and general like that.”

“Isn’t that a judgment to be decided by the Tai people alone? If they feel as you do, then I’m sure they will deliver that judgment with their own hands. So, do I have your word that you won’t lay hands upon them in that way yourselves?”

“I can’t make any such promises, but I shall make the effort.”

“At the very least, let’s get out of here. Let’s not spill any blood in the presence of a kirin.”

“Wait—” came a voice behind her.

Youko shook free the hand that clasped her arm. “If they are not part of your plans, then I suppose we can continue where we left off.”

One of the underling guards batted away the hand still reaching for her. Youko was escorted out in the company of the Naisai. Pinned against the wall by half a dozen other men, Risai turned her pale face to her as she exited the room.

If she could, Youko deeply wished Risai and Taiki to understand that none of this was their fault, that none of this should weigh heavily upon their minds.

The thought had barely crossed her mind when she was thrown sideways. Her mind hadn't reacted to the surprise when a scream erupted behind her. She picked herself off the floor and spun around. With a leaden thud, an arm clutching a sword fell at her feet.

Somebody shouted. A man advancing on Risai had pivoted and aimed his sword at Youko. Before the tip of the sword made contact, a beast's paw tore through the man's chest. The sharp, bloody talons withdrew and the man toppled over.

There was nobody behind the man except Taiki, standing frozen in place seemingly quite far away.

"At least put up a fight!"

Youko glanced over her shoulder to see a white-faced Keiki running toward her. A number of bodies lay on the floor of the room. A number of others ran screaming through the gore trying to escape.

"You certainly showed up at the right time," Youko said with a grim smile.

"En Taiho left some of his shirei behind. Why didn't you do more to resist?"

"Hey, I wasn't armed."

"Even without a sword, you could have done something! Please stop saying you can do without Jouyuu."

"Okay. At any rate, thanks for coming to the rescue."

Keiki gave her a look like a parent dealing with a fractious child. "Whenever any shirei keep you company long enough, they inevitably end up covered with blood."

Youko grinned. "Sorry." She said to Risai and Taiki, "My apologies. I've caused you a great deal of inconvenience."

"No, think nothing of it. Are you all right?" Risai rushed to her side.

"I seem to have emerged unharmed. More importantly, we need to get Risai and Taiki to different quarters. Keiki, you should get out of here too. It's not good for your health."

Youko got to her feet. She glanced down at one of the men sprawled on the floor. The Naisai was among the recently departed. His two henchmen no longer drew breath either. Three others had suffered deep wounds but were alive.

She wasn't really so nonchalant about going to her death. But it probably was true that she was too damned tired to care at that particular moment. She couldn't be bothered to fight back or pitch a fit. Yes, she should have confronted these interlopers and defended her reputation. But she didn't possess the confidence or the conceit to contradict them.

She had once believed she'd been fated to be empress. Lately, though, she had a hard time seeing the workings of Divine Providence in miraculous terms. Not that she objected to anybody else perceiving things that way. If it made the burden lighter, then why not? That was her feeling now.

"They're rounding up the rest of them." Rokuta bounded up as they left the building.

Behind them, more soldiers came running and a great commotion broke out. She could hear the curses and cries of the remaining henchmen being dragged off.

## Chapter 48

[7-4] Kantai made his report as they returned to the Inner Palace. “A total of eleven were involved in the rebellion, all from the Ministry of Heaven. The Naisai was in charge. It seems confined just to them. Three captured with injuries. The remaining five who tried to flee were apprehended.”

Koshou was waiting for them, looking as if he was trying to squeeze his body into a little ball. As soon as Youko looked at him, he bowed deeply.

“I’m really sorry.”

“For what?” Youko blinked, and Kantai couldn’t help grinning at her reaction.

“I must apologize. It was a mistake to leave you unaccompanied by the Daiboku or any of his retainers.”

“But I threw everybody out.”

“That doesn’t excuse letting you out of our sight like that,” Koshou said, raising his head.

“It’s not your fault. Besides, it wasn’t your responsibility in the first place.”

It was the duty of the *Shajin* within the Ministry of Summer, specifically the responsibility of the *Shiyuu*. In public, the job of the *Kofun-shi*. In private, the job of the Daiboku. “Private” meant the Inner Palace. The Inner Palace included the most secluded parts of the Imperial Palace, the Eastern and Western Palaces, the Imperial residences and sleeping quarters, Jinjuu Manor and the Roshin up to the Forbidden Gate, including the Naiden and the Gaiden.

Everything else constituted the Outer Palace. Strictly speaking, the Naiden and the Gaiden were part of the Outer Palace. Under normal circumstances, the empress only traveled as far in the Inner Palace to where it abutted the Gaiden. And as a general rule, government officials only ventured as far in the Outer Palace to where it abutted the Naiden.

"The Daiboku is responsible for my personal protection within the Inner Palace. The West Gardens are part of the Guest Palace. And that's in the Outer Palace."

"Well, that may be true, but—"

Kantai gave the dejected Koshou a friendly pat on the back. "By not accepting his apologies, you're kind of putting Koshou here in a tough spot. The West Gardens are definitely in the Outer Palace, outside his jurisdiction. Normally the empress wouldn't leave the Inner Palace except to conduct official business. In that case, the Kofun-shi would accompany her. On this occasion, though, Her Highness was in the West Gardens on other than official business."

"That is true. I wasn't there according to law or ritual, and no official imperial guests are installed in the Guest Palace. Ever since I brought Risai into the Imperial Palace, I've been rather capricious in flaunting custom and precedent in that regard. I consider this my fault."

Kantai scowled rather fiercely in response to Youko's apology. "Yes, empresses can be capricious creatures. Otherwise, there'd be no reason for a kingdom ever to falter and fall. Because that wasn't official business, it wasn't the province of the Kofun-shi. Your personal protection can't fall between the cracks. If there's a question about whether the Daiboku and the Kofun-shi should be handling your security detail, the duty should go to the Daiboku."

Koshou hung his head. "That is indeed the case. What with emperors and Taiho from other kingdoms, the air gets pretty rarified in there. It just didn't seem to me I should be hanging around, privy to what people were saying and doing and such. In the Inner Palace, Youko's always sallying off to see her friends. That's why I let down my guard."

Koshou and his retainers had escorted her up to the West Gardens, and then kept their distance after that. He couldn't deny that he would have preferred sticking by her the whole time to and from the West Gardens.

"That was an error on Koshou's part. The notion that it is acceptable to maintain a relaxed security detail within the Inner Palace arose only because no dangerous threats had yet made it that far. The Naiden and Gaiden are considered in the public eye, so to speak, and all the buildings have their own

guards assigned. That is not true of the West Gardens. As in this case, no official imperial guests were present, so neither was the customary security detail. Anybody with access to the Imperial residences can also access the West Gardens, and that seems to be what happened here.”

Koshou nodded. Kantai smiled wryly. “As the Daiboku, Koshou must apologize for his failings in this regard. In addition, an official report will be submitted by his retainers to Her Highness.”

“What sort of report?”

“To the effect that the empress has also erred in ways that must be rectified. While her unwillingness to toe a hard line and her generosity with others are admirable characteristics, when the rules are flaunted, this is the sort of harm that can result. The ministers and officials have their duties to tend to, and unlike Her Highness, they are not at liberty to ignore them at their own discretion. A ruler who disregards the law, customs, and precedents is likely to attract ministers and retainers who do the same. Hence, the Daiboku should not be asked to shoulder all the blame for this incident.”

“So *that’s* the version you want to end up with?”

“Yes, but keeping in mind that *not* having Koshou apologize and *not* holding him responsible are not the same thing. Your Highness has been too lax in making such distinctions. Forgoing the apology will be taken as negating the mistake. By the same token, Your Highness should not be seen as letting herself off the hook. Those around you will take note. If he’s perceived to be sliding by thanks to your patronage, Koshou will lose face as well.”

“Yes. I see,” Youko muttered.

Koukan came into the room. “Oh, there you are.” He turned to Koshou. “The Daiboku will take responsibility and serve three months of house arrest.”

*Wait a minute—* Youko was about to say.

Koukan continued in a calm and collected tone of voice, “However, the Taiho has asked us to recognize that the manner in which Her Highness has made hay of the rules and regulations made it difficult for the Daiboku to carry out his duties properly. The Daiboku distinguished himself capturing the traitors and so

the one should be sufficient to offset the other. I think that would be a good way to put it. That should preserve the integrity of the civil service, don't you think?"

He said to Youko, "Is there any part of this you can't go along with?"

"I'm making hay of the rules and regulations? Geez, and I just got the same tongue-lashing from Kantai."

"And so?"

"Fine," Youko said with a self-deprecating grin.

Kantai smiled as well. After telling Koukan that the suspects had been handed over to the Ministry of Fall, he clapped Koshou on the back and the two of them left.

Koukan watched them leave and handed Youko a document.

"Apparently, the Naisai has been nursing deeply-felt disagreements with the current state of affairs for some time now. He was previously an undersecretary in the same department, serving below the Naisai as a personal assistant to the empress and Saiho. He ran a tight ship and was promoted to Naisai. Lately, though, your ladies-in-waiting in the Roshin have pretty much squeezed him out. Since his time as an undersecretary, he took great pride serving in the Roshin. But apparently, his pride and patience reached its limits."

"Oh," said Youko. She sighed.

"To make matters worse, you took on retainers from outside the aristocracy, liberally flaunted the rules, and brought in complete strangers as your closest confidants. Well, you get the idea. He had one pretty big chip on his shoulder."

The participants in the coup d'etat were from the Ministry of Heaven. The Ministry of Heaven was not directly involved with the administration of the kingdom. Its portfolio was the palace itself, and serving the empress and Saiho there. Those who couldn't take pride in working in such close proximity to the empress probably weren't fit for the job.

"And if you're harboring any sympathies with such sentiments, then you should rid yourself of them."

Koukan wasn't one to sugarcoat anything, but his firm tone of voice surprised

her a bit. She looked back at him and he raised an eyebrow. "General Ryuu and the Tai Taiho filled me in about what went on after the Naisai and his underlings invaded the West Gardens."

"You show up as well prepared as always."

"A situation as grave as this demands it. I'd like to ask you again, just to make certain, but you didn't give credence to their grievances, did you?"

Youko looked away. "They did have a point. They didn't know the whole story, and after observing my actions without knowing the context, it wouldn't be unreasonable to jump to those conclusions. If you want to call me the wrong empress for the job, I'm not going to bother arguing with you. I'm certainly not going to go around declaring that only I can save Kei. That's not for me to judge or decide."

"Then let me explain it to you," Koukan answered at once. He set the papers on the desk. "To start with, making any judgments about what kind of empress you are all depends on who is doing the observing and when. In any case, what kind of empress you are is quite unrelated to this particular incident. The minute they picked up those swords they lost any right to claim the high moral ground and pass judgments on other people."

"You are correct there."

"The reason we maneuvered the Naisai and his clique out of the Roshin was because we feared developments of this nature. All the ministers agree that untrustworthy individuals should not be elevated to positions of trust that place them in your immediate proximity. They did not warrant such trust. That's what it comes down to. The decision was based on an examination of their characters and temperaments. I see no errors in that judgment. First and foremost were intimations about hanjuu and rebels, wasn't it?"

Koukan looked at Youko. "People who think that way are the ones most likely to act on authoritarian impulses. Not the kind of people you want to give any authority to in the first place. Nobody should put weapons in the hands of people like that. Second, people who have shown no shame in saying such things can't be expected to know right from wrong, and certainly are not qualified to contribute in any constructive way to the political process. Third, those who

don't know the whole situation are not in the position to judge. Forth, those who, based on such speculations, concoct crimes about which they know nothing, and then hand down judgments based on those speculations, and harbor no doubts the entire time—they should not be given jurisdiction over anything. Fifth, no trust should be placed in those incapable of seeing their own faults and failings, who instead blame others for their own bad fortunes. Lastly, I should not need to add that those who go against the law and the Way in order to accomplish their purposes are a dangerous lot. We cannot tolerate such risks in the presence of Your Highness. These are the reasons we felt it imprudent to promote them in their positions. Do you disagree?"

Youko looked back at him, a bit stunned.

"Observing them in their day-to-day activities, they did not strike us as worthy of being elevated to serve directly at your side. Consequently, they were barred from the Roshin. I believe they have now demonstrated the correctness of that decision."

Youko rested her elbows on the desk and laced her fingers together. "Well, then, let me pose you this question. Don't you think that if they *had* been promoted, they wouldn't have resorted to such actions?"

"Let me answer with a question of my own, then. Could you trust someone who only hewed to the straight and narrow when rewarded, and promised to stray whenever frustrated?"

Youko examined Koukan with uplifted eyes. She tented her fingers together. "Would you apply the same rule to yourself? If, perchance, your successes were overlooked and attention paid only to your sins?"

Koukan responded with a flinty gaze. "Should I take that as a personal criticism? As Your Highness well knows, while elevating those persons of trust to serve as the kingdom's principal ministers, I must also make sure the middle-ranked civil servants and junior officers are toeing the line and doing their duty."

"Yeah, sorry."

In response to Youko's apology, Koukan sighed and smiled. "In the final analysis, the problem was one of temperament and character. That is the true reflection of how they lived and how they behaved. It is there that attention

should be paid. Anybody should be able to look and see. If they prove worthy of your faith, then happily their actions will be rewarded. An examination of Risai-dono's example should prove the point."

"Risai?"

"Why did Your Highness reach out to her in the first place?"

"I'm not exactly sure myself."

"She came barging into Kinpa Palace and you took one look at the atrocious state she was in. Wasn't that it? Risai-dono was so injured flying through the hornets nest of youma that Sui Province had become. And didn't her willingness to go to such lengths constitute sufficient proof of her desire to save Tai?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Risai-dono begged you to save Tai. Except that becoming so involved in the internal affairs of another kingdom is a grievous sin. Risai-dono was likely aware of that from the start."

"Koukan—"

"She may have come here to appeal to your sympathies, with a full knowledge of the consequences. It is also possible that she did not have a full knowledge of the consequences, or had put them out of her mind. And even if she knew exactly what she was doing, she may have been driven by the desperation of her situation. As long as things turned out well for Tai, she didn't care what happened to Kei. We can't know for certain what was on her mind and in her heart. But Your Highness did devote an extraordinary amount of time to her cause, and I, for one, did not object."

"Ah—"

"That that was because we could observe her words and actions. The way she related to you, and to us, and even to Koshou. Based on everything she said and did, she did not strike me as the kind of person who would happily see Tai saved at the expense of Kei. I lack any ability to read her mind, but if she did indeed come here with the intent of leading you into sin, that was, I believe, the product of her desperate straits, and not something whose implications she had considered fully."

"Yes," said Youko, with a nod.

"In any case, that's what it comes down to in the end. How others treat you is largely the result of how you treat them. Approach me in a manner that says your words and actions value me, and I may well move Heaven and Earth to accommodate you. Whether the world will reward you in turn all depends on the person and the circumstances. But these fellows carried on ignorant of that simple equation, cursed their bad luck, and attacked their liege instead. I believe they merely turned their own self-loathing outwards."

"I've heard the same thing said in Yamato."

"Except that when such spiteful people pick up swords to make their case, it is not the reason of their arguments that people are listening to. This is yet another example of a man being rewarded according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings."

# Chapter 49

[7-5] Risai came into the room with the evening meal. “How are you feeling?”

Taiki was up and gazing out the window. They were in the parlor of the Taishi’s manor where Risai was living. “I am doing fine,” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

Though he was putting a brave face on things, he still looked a bit drawn. Risai smiled, as if to dispel her misgivings. “Recently, when you were asleep, the Imperial Kei graciously came by to see you. She wanted to apologize for causing any more contamination to your environment.”

“It was not her fault.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Risai agreed as she set the table. “The Imperial Kei concerns herself with her subjects so, and then something like that happens. It really brought home to me what a tough job ruling a kingdom must be.”

“Indeed.” Taiki remained mum for a while. Then he said, “Will you be returning to Tai, Risai?”

“What?” At first, Risai didn’t comprehend what he was asking. She tilted her head to one side as if to double-check her hearing.

Taiki looked at her, a look of great earnestness in his eyes. “We cannot continue to impose ourselves on Kei like this.”

Risai took in these words with no small measure of surprise. When she finally grasped what Taiki was saying, she felt her countenance grow pale. “Just a minute, Taiho—”

“We cannot allow ourselves to become the seed of greater calamities in Kei. We have tested their patience and disrupted their lives more than enough. After this, I believe we must move to a place where we can fend for ourselves.”

"But, Taiho, that is quite untenable. Not only your constitution, but—if you would pardon my saying so—your horn and your shirei—"

The rush of anxiety left Risai flushed. She felt it was necessary to nip this inclination in the bud. She had thought in vague terms about returning to Tai when and if she found him. With Taiki by her side, they could look for Gyousou using his "imperial sense." But Taiki had lost his horn and his essential nature as a kirin. He no longer had his shirei. Tai remained an infested nest of youma. And she had lost her good arm.

The incident with the Naisai had forced her to again confront the severity of her injuries. A bunch of armed ruffians had charged into the room and threatened the life of Taiki and the Imperial Kei, and she could barely lift a finger to help them. She was easily overpowered and held down by men who didn't look like they'd had a day of military training in their lives.

Even factoring in the state of her health, she was pretty useless as a military officer. If they returned to Tai, she would be incapable of protecting him. She'd been aware of this all along, but she hadn't come to grips with how helpless she really was. All her vague notions about the subject had been brought clearly into focus. She still hadn't recovered from the shock.

"We can't do this, Taiho. I understand how you feel, but we can't go back to Tai. You need to take care of yourself while I solicit help from among the refugees. If we can summon even a small band of supporters—"

Taiki shook his head. "It is true that I am powerless. Nevertheless, the fact remains that we are citizens of Tai."

Risai felt as if she'd been frozen solid.

"Tai is a kingdom that even the gods have abandoned. Is that not the truth? Tai has no emperor. The good will of other kingdoms never reaches her shores. And Heaven will not deign to grant her any miracles. It is the same as Tai not having a kirin. But Tai still has its subjects, such as you and me."

"Even without a horn, the Taiho is still our kingdom's kirin. And my hope. Not something so easily sacrificed. If somebody must return to Tai and search for our liege and rally the people, then that is something that *I* will do. That was my true intention all along. The Taiho must be secured in a safe location. I beg you to set

aside dangerous ideas like returning to Tai.”

Taiki wasn’t the only thing that Risai had lost. One other fear still gripped her. After the disaster in Kouki, Risai had been sent to Jou Province to quell the rebellion there. On her way, she had taken Nisei-shi under her protection. His eyewitness reports had revealed the extent of Asen’s treachery.

At the same time, the incident was used as a pretext to sully Risai’s honor. But perhaps even worse was that Asen somehow knew she was protecting Nisei-shi. Risai had sent a secret communique to Haboku and Sougen alone. Considering its contents, neither of them would have carelessly leaked the information to a third party. So it was likely that only Gyousou’s retainers would have been privy to it. And one of them had passed it on to Asen.

She could not imagine that any of Gyousou’s retainers would countenance spies or eavesdroppers. They would have met behind closed doors and taken all necessary precautions. Nevertheless, Asen had been informed, which meant that someone within their group had done the informing.

A wolf in Gyousou’s own house was guarding the henhouse.

Risai looked into Taiki’s guileless eyes. She didn’t want to expose him to such disagreeable realities, but this only doubled the danger to them in Tai. It would become necessary to establish lines of communication with Gyousou’s old retainers and rally their troops. And yet a traitor might be lurking in their midst, someone well-known to them, who could appear at any moment as a friend and intimate. Risai would have no way of protecting him from such a person.

All she could do was mumble incoherently what a bad idea this all was. Taiki flashed her a puzzled smile. “You have not changed one bit, Risai.”

Risai gave him a puzzled look of her own.

“You are worrying about me and doing your best to shield me from anything unpleasant or frightening. It was the same way when Gyousou disappeared.”

“Taiho—”

“I was really worried about Gyousou-sama. But nobody would give me a straight answer. Well, what you told me may have been the truth. But I knew that all the adults around me were hiding anything unpleasant from my eyes. So

I had to turn to Asen to find out anything that was not sugar-coated.”

Risai caught her breath.

“Asen told me that Gyousou-sama was in danger. He said Gyousou-sama had been ambushed. When you said that he had arrived safely in Bun Province, I found myself no longer able to trust you. I believed Asen when he told me that a fierce attack had been launched before they arrived, and the outcome was uncertain. Desiring to help him, I dispatched my shirei to help Gyousou-sama. I never doubted Asen for a second. In fact, I came to question the veracity of anybody who told me anything other than bad news.”

Taiki smiled thinly. “I really was a child, and very hard to please. Whatever I tried to do only caused Risai and everybody else more problems. And now is no different.”

“Taiho, don’t say such things—”

“But Risai, I am no longer a child. To be sure, speaking in terms of my abilities, I was much more capable then. I’m quite helpless now. Still, I am not so immature that I could be content to bemoan my helpless state and settle for the safe status quo.”

“Taiho—”

“Somebody must save Tai. If not we citizens of Tai, then who?”

“But—then—let’s go back to Mt. Hou and confer again with Genkun, to see if there is anything we can do to save Tai.”

“And what, may I ask, do you think she will do on our behalf?”

Risai didn’t know how to reply.

“And can Heaven be so relied upon? Only those under its personal care and protection can rest well knowing that help will come. At what point did the people of Tai become the property of Heaven?”

“But Taiki—”

“I have learned something of the steps you took to seek assistance from Kei. If you had not done so, I most definitely would never have made it back here. I am not so naive as to believe that nothing is beyond our power to accomplish. It

may be beyond the power of a horn-less kirin and a one-armed general to save Tai in her current state. But, Risai—”

Taiki grasped Risai’s remaining hand. “This was never something we were destined to accomplish through the strength of our own wills alone. If, unable to pull Tai back from the brink from here, we conclude that there is nothing we can ever do and so do nothing, we will forever lose the right to call ourselves citizens of Tai.”

*But of course,* Risai thought, looking back at him.

She had never understood why she wanted to save Tai. At the same time, she couldn’t help being aware of how quickly she lost that feeling when Taiki was right there in front of her. As far as she was concerned, if Taiki was safe—if she could guarantee his safety—then that was the same as keeping Tai safe as well.

Even if that safety came from residing in Kei and she did not actually contribute to it herself—as long as Taiki was safe, then Tai was safe inside her. Protecting Tai had become for her the same as preserving something that belonged to her, her motherland. And if she could not and it was destroyed, then as an extension of Tai, it would become her fault.

But as long as she could keep Taiki safe, Tai would never be lost to her.

“We are citizens of Tai. If we reach out to others as citizens of Tai, then there are duties and responsibilities we also bear as her people. If we cast them aside, then Tai is lost to us.”

Losing that place to which they were connected was no different than losing themselves.

Risai had lost her imperial position and her friends and colleagues. Kaei had become a distant memory. Apart from her connection to a place called Tai, she had nothing. It had to be saved so that she would not lose herself.

Now that she had Taiki, and as long as she held on to him, Tai remained alive within her. Here in Kei she knew where she stood. The prospect of leaving was terrifying. But for Tai, its people, Gyousou, all those imprisoned within its borders and all those who had lost their lives there, remaining here was nothing but a betrayal.

They had no other recourse except to leave this safe redoubt and return to Tai.

She looked at her hand, her vision clouded with tears. The hand holding her hand was indistinguishable from her own.

"You really have grown up."

# Chapter 50

[7-6] Early one morning, at the beginning of autumn, Risai and Taiki took their leave of the Taishi's manor.

After discussing it at length together, they had decided not to raise the subject with the Imperial Kei. If they did, she would undoubtedly blame herself or the incident with the Naisai. And even if they could have managed to convince her otherwise, they would have put her in a difficult position.

In any case, keeping them here was akin to taking the burdens of Tai upon her own head, just as telling them to leave would seem like casting Tai aside. Risai didn't doubt that the young empress would see things exactly in this light.

*Besides*, Risai sighed in her heart, if such an empress as Youko wished her to stay, she was not sure she could refuse her. Even now, Risai could not extricate the thought from her mind that she was acting with unpardonable incivility. Yet she understood Taiki's reasoning for returning to Tai and agreed with it.

There was no doubt in her mind that she must return to Tai with him, just as she was certain that Taiki was a symbol of hope that Tai could not afford to lose. Except that she had no confidence in her abilities to protect him. Unimaginable dangers awaited them. If she could somehow dissuade him, she couldn't deny that she would try.

The ordinary person in her said they must return. The general who served the Taiho said she should not. Her heart warred with itself, and finally yielded to the strength of Taiki's resolve.

"Risai, will you remain behind?" Taiki had asked her, clearly seeing through her facade.

Risai shook her head vigorously. "Don't say such absurd things."

"Not bidding the Imperial Kei farewell—" he said empathetically. "After all they

have done for you, leaving like this must be painful.”

Risai tried to laugh it off. “Not at all. Only some lingering regret. The Imperial Kei and all the rest have done so much to save Tai. That’s why I don’t really have the courage to face them like this.”

Everything was done for the good of Tai. Risai came to Gyouten as a citizen of Tai. To escape into a life of comfort and cast Tai aside would make light of all that care and consideration. To behave so despicably would be taking all the people of Tai for granted. That’s what it meant for her to be a part of the greater whole as a citizen of Tai.

Risai sighed again and opened the door to the stables behind the Taishi’s manor. Only one stall was occupied. Recognizing her, Hien came to his feet, bright and eager.

“Hien.” Taiki ran over. Hien shied a bit at first, but soon realized who had addressed him, and leaned forward. “You remembered who I was,” Taiki said, stroking his fur. Hien narrowed his eyes and purred gently.

Observing this with a smile on her face, Risai got the saddle and tack in order. Gently taking up the reins, she led Hien out of the stables. She looked up at the early morning sky.

“Heading back above the Sea of Clouds, we should arrive at one of the provincial palaces in good time. There’s no telling how far Asen’s grip might have reached by now, but the youma would tear us to pieces below the Sea of Clouds. No matter what, we are determined to set all obstacles aside and press forward. It really doesn’t matter which path we take.”

Taiki nodded. Hien purred softly and rubbed his head against Taiki’s shoulder.

“What are you two doing up at this hour?” a voice suddenly rang out.

Risai spun around. Rokuta emerged from the darkness of the surrounding gardens. The big shadow behind him was Koshou.

Risai and Taiki stood there stock still. “En Taiho—how—?”

Rokuta said with a nonchalant glance, “Oh, I happened to have been eavesdropping the other day—” He grinned. “Sorry. But I left a shirei to watch

over you. So word was passed along.”

“En Taiho, I—”

Rokuta raised his hand, silencing him. “Don’t worry. I left Youko out of the loop. Though just taking off like this would cause a few problems. You forget that you’re still my Taishi?”

“That is—”

“The Taishi of En taking it upon himself to visit Tai would raise more than a few eyebrows. Not to mention going there to pick a quarrel or two with the powers that be. That’d be even worse.”

Risai and Taiki sank into silence. Rokuta sighed and then smiled. “In that case, I shall have you demoted from the Registry of Wizards. Frankly, I fear his sudden sabbatical is making our Taishi soft in the head. But here’s your severance pay.”

He tossed her a white object. Risai reflexively reached out before realizing that her right hand was not there to catch it. With a grim little smile she knelt down and picked it up. In the darkness she couldn’t make out the details, but the wooden card appeared to be a passport.

“There’s no telling if you’ll ever need it, but I had it made for you just in case. The seal affixed will grant you access to funds from a trade credit union. In any case, if it doesn’t work in Tai, here’s something to cover your traveling expenses.”

This time Risai caught the purse he tossed her. “En Taiho—”

“And luggage sufficient to your needs. It’s loaded up on Tiger. He’ll accompany you.”

Risai’s eyes widened with surprise.

“It’d be asking too much of that tenba to shoulder everything by itself. When you’ve gotten to where you need to go, I’d appreciate it if you’d send him back. Tama gets lonely without him, you see.”

Risai accepted the wooden card with thanks. “Yes. I most definitely will.”

“Okay, then,” Rokuta said with a nod. He put his hands on his hips and gave them both a good looking over. “We really don’t want to see you go. Keep that in

mind."

"We shall never forget what you've done for us."

"We'll be waiting for any word of good news."

With that, Rokuta turned around and approached the edge of the shadowed woods. Almost as if in passing, he clapped the human silhouette standing there on the shoulder. Koshou emerged from the leafy shadows.

Mixed emotions played across his countenance as he pointed in the direction of the Forbidden Gate. "The kijuu is waiting there."

"Koshou, you've been a great help to us."

"Oh, it was nothing," he said, though not as if he really believed it.

His shoulders drooped as they wended their way through the copse of trees. His heart really didn't seem in it. All the way from the Taishi's manor in the Naiden to the Forbidden Gate nobody said anything. They walked along, looking at their feet.

They had almost arrived at the Forbidden Gate when Koshou glanced back at them and said, "If it was possible, I wouldn't mind coming along with you. I don't really know what I could do to contribute, but I am officer of the Imperial Court."

He said all this with a very conflicted look on his face. Risai responded, "I think the Imperial Kei needs you by her side."

"Yeah, true, there is that."

"I would like you to communicate to her our deepest thanks and gratitude. I wouldn't want any of this to upset her."

Koshou nodded. They walked up to the gate. The officials waiting inside opened the doors so they could pass through to the broad ledge on the other side. The wan light of the Moon shone down and the Sea of Clouds reached out before them.

The door of the gate from the Naiden to the Forbidden Gate opened.

Toshin observed as two human shadows and that of a kijuu appeared. Standing next to him, Gaishi took hold of the reins of the suguu and approached

them. Toshin followed after him.

The two were traveling light. Gaishi handed the reins to the woman general. “I was asked to make sure you took charge of him.”

“I am very grateful to you.”

“Take care, now,” Gaishi said and bowed.

The woman answered with a polite bow of her own. Toshin stepped forward and handed her the items he was carrying. She looked at him, surprised.

“This is the sword you once handed over to my care. It may have been presumptuous of me but I had it sharpened.”

“Thank you,” the woman said, taking possession of the sword with her left hand. Her right arm, that Toshin remembered as so badly injured, was no longer there. “Thank you so very much.”

“Not a big deal.”

“I don’t remember your face but I recall the voice. Weren’t you the one who interceded for me with the Daiboku when I collapsed in the Roshin?”

“Well, um, yeah, that was me,” Toshin said with a nod.

Risai smiled and bowed deeply. “As a result, I was able to meet with the Imperial Kei and receive the assistance I required. All the good that followed is thanks to you. I am so deeply appreciative.”

Toshin shook his head. He would have to find out from Gaishi where she and her companion were going and what they would do after this.

“Take care and stay well. I will pray for your safe return.”

The stone table appeared to float there in the fading moonlight. They watched as the two kijuu flew away from the ledge.

Observed the scene from a nearby tower, Youko said to her companion, “Don’t you think we should have said goodbye?”

“I don’t know what I would have said to them.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We’d only be holding them back, Risai and Taiki.”

"Probably."

"I hope they get wherever they're going."

"They'll make it to a provincial capital somehow. Traveling above the Sea of Clouds, they'll avoid the youma."

"Meaning their real challenges will come later. At the very least, I wish we could have sent some shirei along with them."

Keiki nodded silently. Rokuta had made it clear that separating the shirei from a emperor—more specifically from the kirin—and sending them into a foreign country was no different in principle than sending in troops. Youko and Keiki had to give up on the idea.

The two kijuu grew further and further away, two painfully helpless specks above the broad expanse of the Sea of Clouds. As they watched, she heard the sound of footsteps running up the staircase.

"Are they gone?" said Rokuta.

"Yeah," Youko said, and turned her attention back to the Sea of Clouds. The two dots seemed to be merging into the cresting waves.

"I gave them the passports. I said that I was the one who prepared them and they pocketed them without a second thought. Lucky they didn't get around to wondering when I'd had the time to think that far ahead."

"When it comes to the En Taiho, I think everybody would wonder the same thing."

"Hey, what's with the attitude? Though when it gets light enough for them to read the fine print on the reverse, they're going to be surprised."

Youko smiled. Whatever extra help they could provide, no matter how slight, had to be worth it. It was easy to calm her thoughts with such rationalizations, but in the end it was only a salve to her own feelings of pity. Not for Tai itself, but for those hearts broken at the prospect of an unsalvageable Tai.

If Kei had only become a bit more prosperous and the Imperial Court a bit more sound. It was hard to relax and trust and seek refuge in a court where discord could arise at a moment's notice. As a matter of fact, there was no way

she could continue to detain them and somehow not make them feel responsible for all the chaos.

She had no choice but to live with the painful knowledge that she was very likely watching them go to their deaths.

“I’ve got to stand on my own two feet first.”

Rokuta stared out at the Sea of Clouds. “What’s that?” he said, glancing over his shoulder.

“I’ve got to stand on my own two feet before I can fancy myself a shoulder to lean on.”

Rokuta turned back to the window. “That’s not it. Helping others is how you find your footing in the first place.”

“You think so?”

“Undoubtedly.”

Youko nodded. Across the Sea of Clouds, the two small silhouettes had already disappeared from sight.

## FROM THE CHRONICLES OF TAI

In the Third Month of the Second Year of Koushi, an Insurrection broke out in Bun Province. Aggrieved that War should have come to Tetsui, the Imperial Tai set forth at the Head of the Imperial Army to subdue the Revolt.

Over the Span of a single Month, His Highness disappeared in Ri'un, Bun Province, and a Meishoku occurred within the Imperial Palace. The Saiho vanished, casting the Imperial Ministers into Confusion.

Asen deceived the Court and donned the Mantle of a Pretender. Indulging in his Authority, Jou Asen (who was born Boku Kou), deftly deployed the Palace Guard of the Right and wielded the Black Arts as his Sword.

Having subjugated the Nine Provinces through his Inhumanity, He thus usurped the Throne.